

## Love Others

I've got an embarrassing admission to make to you all. You might remember my family is from West Virginia - a lot of people comment to me that I don't have an accent. I just tell them it's cause I grew up watching too much TV instead of talking to people.

Well the funny thing is - while I and my brothers don't have much of an accent - my mom definitely does. So much so that I even misunderstand her at times.

For years I'd always told people the funny story about how my mom REALLY wanted girls, and that if I would've been a girl, my name would have been Mercedes - because that's the only way my dad could ever have a mercedes.

My full name, I'd thought I'd heard, was to be Mercedes Korean Smith - y'know Korean like the nationality, and they'd call me Cory for short.

Anyways, that came up with my family recently, and I'm laughing about it, and my mom says... Cory we weren't going to call you Korean - it was Corinne!

Now, that was embarrassing for my mom because of her accent...but you guys...you don't know HOW MANY people I've told that to over the years.

I believed TO MY CORE that my name was supposed to be Korean.

We do this kind of thing all the time. There are basic things - simple things that we THINK we know - that are core to how we perceive ourselves. Some are simple and silly, but some are very important. How much more important, then, that we make sure we've got it right.

We've spent the last three weeks reflecting on BASICS of the Christian journey, all rooted in our Love for God:

1. We recognize Fear of the Lord as the appropriate beginning of wisdom as we as broken, finite people encounter a holy, mighty, infinite God. And yet as we come before Him for any length of time, we discover that this mighty God is unfailingly FOR us - and fear gives way to love and worship.
2. The character of God's love is made perfect in His son Jesus - who came to live and die for us and invites us to follow Him in all we do.
3. And we are able to follow Him, even when it is difficult, because we are filled with God's Holy Spirit to guide us, transform us, and empower us.

Another way of summarizing our these points is in what Jesus calls the Greatest Commandment - to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

We respond to Him with right emotion, follow Christ with all our strength and determination, and allow the Spirit to conform our mind and soul to His will.

Starting this week, we'll turn our gaze to what Jesus calls the 2nd Greatest Commandment - to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Join me this morning in 1 John 4, starting in verse 7...

#### READING

1 John 4:<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Let's pray.

What does it mean to love others? We use that word a lot, but we often mean very different things by it.

- To have fuzzy feelings for?
- Showing Tolerance?
- Commitment to Justice?
- Being really kind and compassionate?
- Guiding people to truth, even if you have to be tough about it?

1 John told us that there's a simple way to know what love is - that's to look at the way Jesus lived for us, and most importantly, the way he died for us.

THAT is what love looks like. And that is what we're commanded to give to others.

So what does that mean practically for us? I want to give a few suggestions to flesh it out a little more.

First: I. LOVE MAINTAINS THE CAPACITY TO FORGIVE.

Pretty much every major religion has some idea of forgiveness that's central to their beliefs.

- Jews and Muslims affirm that God is merciful.
- Buddhists teach selflessness and detachment as a way of life, forgiveness rids us of unhealthy emotion.

- Sikhism teaches forgiveness as a gift of compassion.
- Even most atheists and humanists will agree that letting go of offense is healthier than holding onto it.

But Christians have greater resources and motivation than any other group to extend and grant forgiveness.

Only Christians have a savior who loved us to the utter depths and forgave us when we responded by murdering Him.

And Jesus teaches us explicitly that the only proper response to that love is to share it forward.

The most direct example is when Jesus teaches us how to pray.

Lord's Prayer - forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us. [Woah, really?]

In case that wasn't clear enough...[6:15, if you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you]

So the baseline in the command to love others is that we ALWAYS maintain the capacity to forgive - no matter what the offense.

It doesn't mean we have to forget.

It doesn't mean we have to go on as if nothing happened.

Forgiving others simply means that we remember just how much mercy we have received and so we share that mercy forward and refuse to hold wrongs against others.

It actually has very little to do with the other person at all.

I was talking to my wife about this, and she said - yeah, but this is hard! Can you share any practical steps for that? How do you work on letting things go?

I said, OK, well first tell me what I did wrong, and I'll tell you how to let it go....

Sort of...but not really. Christian forgiveness is one of those practices that is pretty straightforward, but it's just not easy to do.

Because forgiveness involves really being wronged AND NOT seeking a just punishment for the person who wronged you.

And I think the only practical thing that we can do to work on building the capacity to forgive is to regularly practice confession and repentance before Christ. When we regularly come before Him to receive and remember His grace, it becomes much harder for us to hold onto grudges against others.

Love says if there was hope for me, there's hope for you.  
If there was mercy for me, there's mercy for you.

And so we release our bitterness and offense and instead hope and pray for the best for the other. Because that's what Jesus did for us. LOVE MAINTAINS THE CAPACITY TO FORGIVE.

Secondly: II. LOVE SEARCHES FOR THE GOOD IN EVERYONE

If you want a sure-fire way to kill your love for someone - make sure to dwell on all their faults. But if you want to love as Jesus commanded, then seek to see them with Jesus' eyes.

I like to say, There are 2 safe assumptions you can make about anyone - friend, stranger, or enemy: (1) they are broken; (2) they are worth knowing and loving.

I can think of 2 great examples of this:

FIRST, The Apostle Paul was originally one of the greatest opponents of the early Church. But the Lord saw something else in his calloused heart and he broke through. Even after he was converted, many of the disciples remained suspicious.

But Barnabas, whose name means Son of Encouragement, lived up to his name by recognizing what God saw in Paul and encouraging him and commending him to the others.

SECOND, a historical example - Before Abraham Lincoln became president, he had a bitter campaign against a man named Edwin Stanton. During that campaign - Edwin pulled no punches in doing everything he could to mock Lincoln's appearance and demean his character.

That's what made it so surprising to everyone in Lincoln's inner circle when after his election, he chose Stanton to serve as his secretary of war...

"Why would you choose the man who so bitterly opposed you?" they asked. "Simple," Lincoln said, "He's the best man for the job."

After his assassination, many kind words were said about Lincoln - but none kinder than Stanton. The man who once used every ounce of his energy to degrade Lincoln before the public now declared him one of the greatest men who ever lived."

Lincoln chose to look past offense to see the potential God had put in this man. And in doing so he transformed an enemy into a friend.

The best way to love a difficult person is to ask the Spirit to show you what God sees in them.

When you do, you may be surprised by the results.

This leads me to a last point that is perhaps the most important, most difficult, and most controversial of Jesus' teachings on loving others.

### III. LOVE REJOICES IN RESTORATION AND MOURNS LOSS.

Jesus gives us 3 simple commands about loving others:

1. Love your neighbor as yourself. [People got confused about that one]
2. [What if I don't love myself?] OK, love one another as I have loved you.
3. [OK, but who is my neighbor?] Love your enemies.

Seriously, there's no loopholes. Jesus says that following Him means literally learning to love EVERYONE the way that He loves us - friends, family, strangers, smelly people, exes, enemies - there are no exceptions.

And this REALLY rubs people the wrong way, particularly when loving our enemies comes face to face with loving our family and friends.

What does it look like practically for me to love someone who is causing harm to the people I care about most deeply? I mean, don't I have an obligation to protect them?

This is why many people choose to ignore Jesus' teaching on nonviolence and nonresistance.

Jesus says if someone hits you, turn the other cheek. He says, don't resist an evil person.

It's just not practical. It's irresponsible. It's weak.

If that's your response, I want to challenge you to go to scriptures and go to Christ and prayer and tell Him just exactly why you think He's wrong. [PAUSE]

There's a lot more I could say about that, but that's another message.

The POINT is this: Jesus' love within us should lead us to ALWAYS SEEK WHOLE, RESTORED RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE WE'RE IN CONFLICT WITH.

I read a great bumper sticker once that said, "I think when Jesus said 'love your enemies,' He PROBABLY meant don't kill them."

Maybe.

There may be times where sin has SO distorted a life that the only reasonable response in the moment seems to be to end it. But that isn't something to celebrate. It's something to mourn.

The desired end of love is always restored and reconciled relationship. There are times when that is just not possible or healthy, but that should always lead us to lament - not praise.

- Divorce after painful years of marriage may bring a sense of relief - but not celebration.
- The death of an enemy or attacker may bring relief or even catharsis - but we still mourn loss of life.

Love ALWAYS hopes, ALWAYS trusts, ALWAYS perseveres. If you have given up on love for someone causing you harm, you have given up on God's hope for the hopeless.

I remember the day they announced Osama Bin Laden had been shot and killed. I knew some people who were hootin and holler'ing - celebrating that he'd been ended.

But some of the Christian mentors I most admired were more reserved. There was a sense of relief, sure...but it was not a happy day.

The lives this man had taken were still lost. His was simply another casualty of his warped heart.

His death may have prevented others. But to celebrate it would only foster in our hearts the same twisted hate that made his own so wicked.

If we are to truly love as God loves, it means that we commit ourselves to doing anything possible to seek and save those who are against us.

To celebrate when we have been reconciled.

And to mourn when that's no longer possible.

## CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, a photographer, Joel Meyerowitz, spent nine months at Ground Zero, documenting the recovery and the wreckage.

On March 30, 2002, Joel was taking photos inside the area of the south tower, when a fireman called to him and handed him the remains of a Bible that he had found in the debris.

The front of the Bible was obliterated. So the remaining fragments of pages sat open-faced, melted onto a piece of heart-shaped steel. While most of the Bible had been destroyed, the little more than half of a page on top was miraculously preserved.

Of all the pages and all the verses, the melted King James Bible was open to Matthew 5. And the first thing Joel noticed was under the heading "Retaliation" in Mathew 5:38-39 where Jesus says, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, you turn the other to him also."

Joel was stunned. How remarkable is it that of all the fragile pages that survived, it was this passage in the midst of such an unspeakable act of evil?

So Joel wrapped the fragile page of Bible melted on steel in a scarf and held on to the Bible for a number of years, until he decided to donate it in 2010 to the September 11 Memorial Museum.

A photo of the Bible on display in the museum was published in a New York Times article titled, "At 9/11 Memorial, an Enduring Message of Forgiveness". In the article, Joel is quoted saying, "My astonishment at seeing the page that the Bible was open to made me realize that the Bible's message survives throughout time, and in every era we interpret its teachings freshly, as the occasion demands."

Indeed Jesus' message of forgiveness endures today. No matter what we've been through or what has been done to us, it still applies to our situation.

Christ still calls us to forgive today, just as he has forgiven us.

We are called to love others, just as he has loved us.

1 John 4:<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

May we do so with abandon.