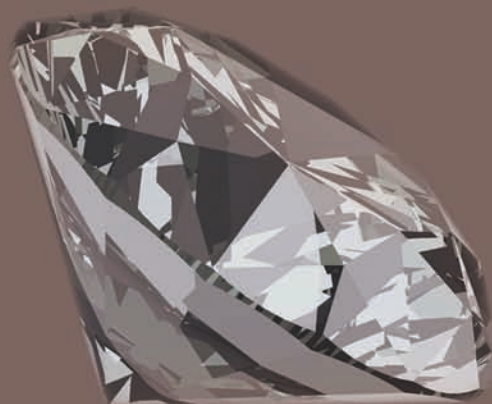

THE FACES OF LOVE

Written by Stephen Villanueva



Faces of Love

Stephen R. Villanueva

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The Faces of Love **What is Agape Love**

When you hear the word love, what do you think about? If I am not mistaken, most of you think happy thoughts and associate that word with all around good feelings. You think of being cared for, being touched, being treated kindly, being adored, admired, and even somewhat adulated. You think of being important to someone and having someone nurture and attend to your feelings. Hopefully you also think about being the giver as well as the receiver of these acts.

These are all important aspects of love, however, I believe that in our culture we have forced the word “love” into a very narrow definition and we do each other disservice by not truly understanding that word in its fullness. I say disservice because if we cannot grasp the many faces of love, we are going to have a preconceived bias in our belief about what in fact is or is not love.

The effect will be that our choices, our actions, our interactions with each other will be limited and artificially constrained by our bias. Thus, we will tend to generalize and categorize certain behavior as patently loving and other behavior as unloving. But either way, we have pretty high odds that we will miss the mark and our relationships will suffer accordingly.

We are starting a new series on the “Faces of Love.” My goal in this series is to help you understand all the different ways that God loves us so that you can understand how that same love is to be expressed amongst each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We are commanded by Jesus to love each other. In fact, Jesus equates our loving each other with the fulfillment of all of His commandments.

John 15:9-14

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

And in Romans 13:8-10, Paul says:

Romans 13:8-10

Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill all the requirements of God’s law. For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting—and any other commandment—are all summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God’s requirements.

Love is to be our life and the very fulfillment of all that God desires of us—all of His requirement for perfection is attained in this one verb—to love. I would even say this; we are never more like Jesus than we love each other. And if that is the case, then it is extremely important that we understand this word and what it means in all of its vast context.

Let’s start with some definitions. In the New Testament, the Bible uses 2 Greek words for love; the first one that we will focus on is the word “*Phileo*” which means tender affection. *Phileo* is used primarily to describe the relationship of kindness, affection, and charity amongst men. From this Greek word we get our word Philadelphia or brotherly love.

Biblically, this definition is not used to describe either God's relationship with us or our relationship to Him. In addition, we are never commanded to *Phileo* one another. Our command to love is altogether a different word. *Phileo* is a love that is birthed from humanity and thus has all the limitations of humanity. It has the potential for great acts of compassion and kindness; yet, it is easily corrupted due to the selfish nature of man.

The one thing I want you to understand about this word; it is by definition limited to all that is natural (both in its ultimate capability and in all of its limitations) and therefore does not intersect with the supernatural. This is not a love which originates from the divine; rather, it man inspired and originates merely from what exists in our soul.

The limitations of this kind of love are easily seen throughout history. It does not matter how long people have chanted that love is the answer, love is the way, and "all we need is love," it just does not seem to be a sustaining reality at any level: not between countries; between people of various races; amongst neighbors; within the family unit, which is supposed to be the safest and most nurturing of societal structures that we have available to us; or even within marriage. Marriage, which is supposed to be the all encompassing epitome of human love; yet it fails at an alarming rate.

A sustaining environment of love, outside of a relationship with God, is unknown to us as human beings. Here is an odd little fact that kind of drives home the point. According to a study released by NATO, since 1945 until now—a period of time where the world has experienced the greatest and most rapid advancements in science, technology, medicine, psychiatric studies, communication, education, globalization of markets, and so on, there have only been 26 days without war. That is it, 26-days or 1/10 of 1% of all the days since 1945.

That is pathetic. However, this should not surprise us when we think of what we have been studying about the human condition. The love that originates from man is inherently corrupt and ultimately selfish. I know this is hard to believe and for all those who are fighting for world peace, I am sorry but the odds are against you. You must understand that because *Phileo* love originates from within the heart of man, it can only express what lies therein. Paul explains this truth in Romans 7.

Romans 7:18

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

The reason that this is true is that those who live outside of a relationship with God—those who live from their flesh, are in a state of hostility toward God. It is this hostility and separation from God that keeps man hostile toward each other. Look at these verses:

Galatians 5:17

The *Old Sinful Nature* loves to do evil, which is just opposite from what the Holy Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are opposite from what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, and your choices are never free from this conflict.

Romans 8:5–8

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, *because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God*; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

There is a war that is always ensuing—whether you know about it or not—a war against God. This is why we so desperately need to find a new life in God and have this hostility removed. Man left to himself

will always fail in his attempts to bring the world into a harmonious balance and no matter how hard he tries he will be unable to experience a sustained love for his fellow man.

Now *Phileo*—or brotherly love—stands in stark contrast to the other word we have in the New Testament for love and that is *Agape*. This kind of love originates from God and presupposes the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in its expression. Now this kind of love not only originates from God but it is the very expression of God; and it is by this love that God chooses to define Himself.

1 John 4:8

But anyone who does not love does not know God—for God is love.

This word *Agape* is very deep in meaning and implication, but to tell you the truth, we do not have a hard fast definition of the word—we just know how that word is expressed by the way God uses and applies it. Keep in mind, except for the inclusion by the Holy Spirit in the Bible, this word has no roots in Greek literature or any other world literature. *Agape* communicates ideas that were previously unknown to the people of that day. In effect, it was created by the Holy Spirit to convey the kind of love that originates from the divine and plays out in the context of human experience.

Love coming from a god was something that only the Hebrews had any real experience with. The gods of the other nations were capricious, cruel and demanded obedience in exchange for who knows what—an illusion. People simply did not have the concept of a loving god that desired to be in relationship with His creation. There is a very good reason for this; the gods of the nations were merely inventions that originated from the human heart.

Jeremiah 16:20-21

Can man make gods for himself? Yet they are not gods! “Therefore behold, I am going to make them know—this time I will make them know My power and My might; and they shall know that My name is the LORD.

Romans 1:18-25

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

And since man is utterly human, they could only infuse their made-up gods with what they had and that was *Phileo* with all its limitations, unpredictability, and restraints. In other words, the love from their gods looked a lot like the love they experienced from their fellow man—predominantly self centered and self seeking.

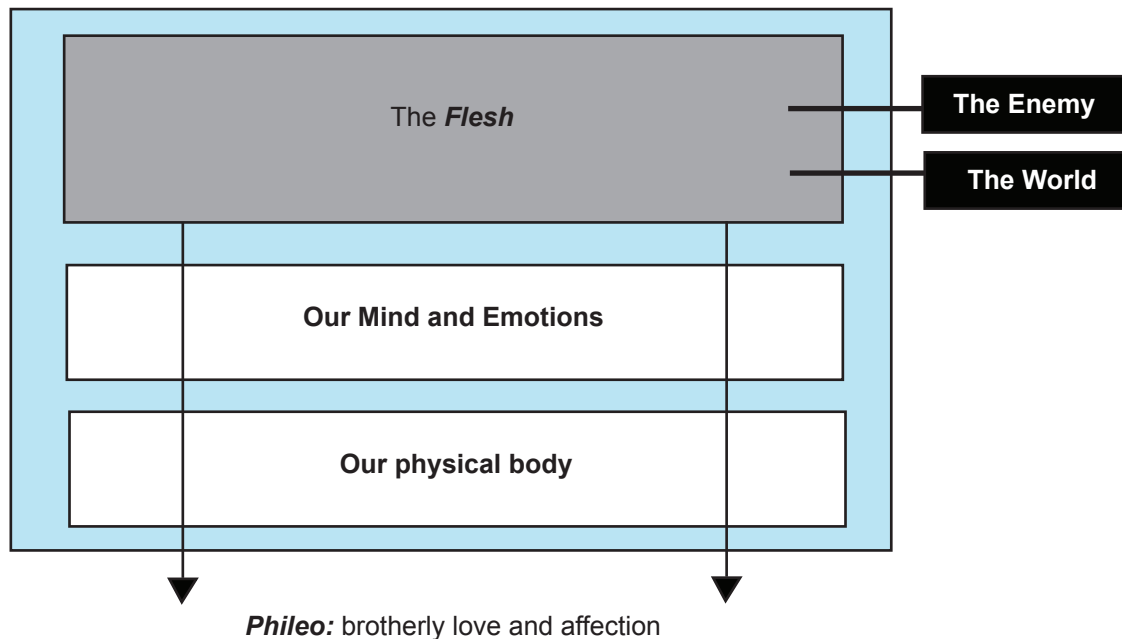
Now I want to clarify something, in its action, in its charity, both of these types of love may look very similar and practically the definitions as evidenced by their expressions do overlap. For instance, *Agape* is not just a love that is between God and man, but it use encompasses the full range of human love and experience. However, contextually they are absolutely separate in how God uses these words.

Phileo deals with a love or affection that is based on interpersonal association and the relational value exchange that takes place between people. In other words, *Phileo* love is rarely given out without some expectation for getting back—not necessarily in the same way or from the same person, but there is a desire even at a minimum to be recognized and appreciated for the effort.

Agape however is based on a deep appreciation and highest regard for another; it is not based on giving to get. The implication is that this kind of love does not operate on the normal platform of human relationships; rather, its origin is divine and thus its expression—in any form—is enveloped with the presence and power of God. Yes! This kind of love is supernatural.

This **distinction of origin** (from God versus the heart of man) makes all the difference in the world, because that means the access to this type of love is found only in and through a relationship with God.

This brings us full circle to a number of concepts that we covered in our study on How God Speaks. First of all, it is founded on humility—our inability and God’s ability. We have no capacity separate from Him to love in this manner.



In our flesh, we are only capable of *Phileo*; and, therefore, the love that we give to others will never satisfy the requirements of the Lord because our love will always be compromised with some level of self interest and therefore will always fall short of God’s love. This is why the Bible says that we are in desperate need for God and in desperate need for an invasion of the supernatural into the natural.

In John 15, which we studied last week, Jesus said that apart from Him we can do nothing; and all our deeds—no matter how loving—that originate outside of Him are like dried up branches that are only good to be gathered into a pile and burned. In our flesh, our good deeds and even our attempts to genuinely love stand separate from a true work of God.

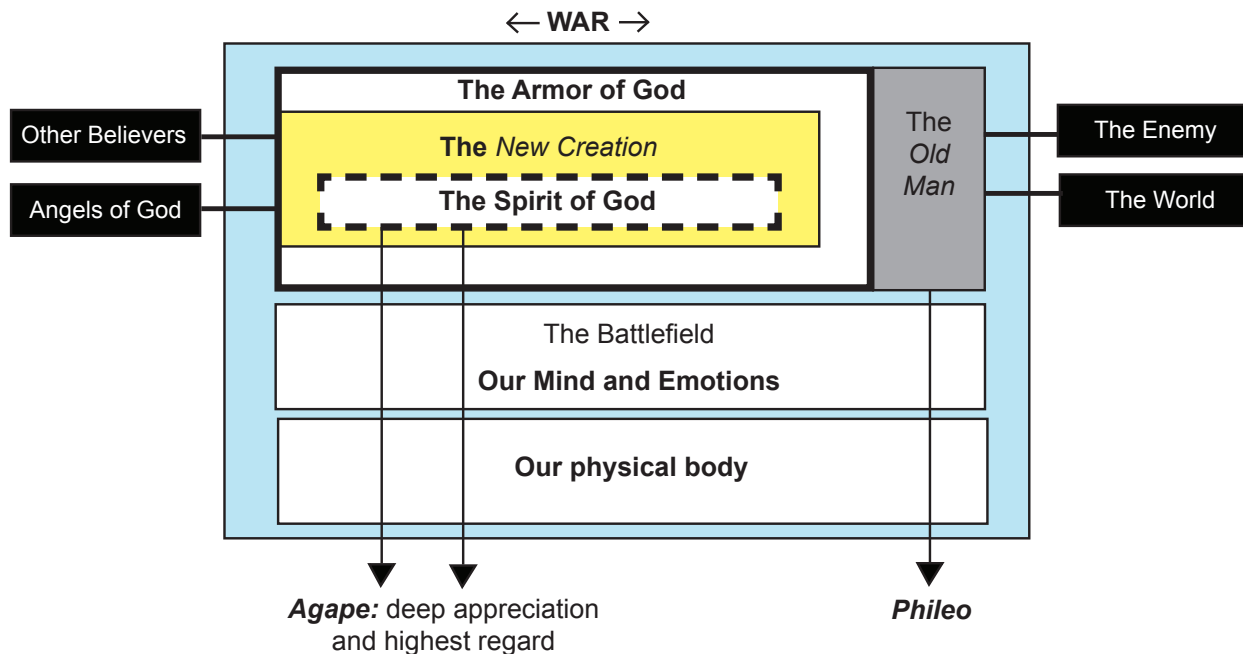
That is why God made accommodation for our corruption as human beings. That is why He offers all men the opportunity to join Him in a deep intimate fellowship where He shares all that He is with you. That is why He invites you to believe in Him, receive Him as your Lord and Savior, be forgiven of all your sins and experience a potent and powerful relationship with Him that is based on His love for you—*Agape* love.

That is also why He offers to every man, woman, and child the opportunity—if they want it—to have the Holy Spirit of God live in them through what the Bible calls the **New Creation**. The **New Creation** is an aspect to our being that does not exist outside of a relationship with God; rather, it is something that God imbues within a person when they decide, by faith, to believe that Jesus: is the only Son of God—part of the triune Godhead (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); came to earth to die for their sins; rose again; and sits at the right hand of the Father waiting for the time when He will return to earth to gather together all those

who belong to Him. And, as the resurrected Lord, Jesus gets the right to call the shots for our lives because He is God and we are not.

This **New Creation** is also called the temple of the Holy Spirit because God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, dwells within the **New Creation** so that we can live by Him and by every word that proceeds from His mouth. God is so loving and compassionate. He knows that on our own we can only produce *Phileo*; thus, He once again becomes the total provision for our life and provides us Himself as our resource through which we can both experience His *Agape* love and be the instrument—or the vessel—through which that love is expressed to others. And as the Spirit lives through us, we are **able** to love with the kind of love by which we have been loved by the Father.

The reality is that we are so dependent upon Him for everything. Even our ability to obey His commandment to love requires us to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior; it requires us to be born-again. A little side note: I know that those two words, “born-again” come with a lot of societal baggage because of how they have been misused, but being born-again merely refers to a person who has been imbued with the **New Creation** and who has the Holy Spirit of God living within their being—that’s it.



This picture is my attempt to depict the reality of a person who has been imbed with the **New Creation** in dwelt with the Holy Spirit of God and the war or contention that ensures between the **New Creation** and our *Old Man* or our *Old Sinful Nature*.

Remember, the ultimate goal of Christianity is not that we serve God, not that we act or talk like “Christians,” not that we do anything for God, except yield to Him the right to live through us so that the will of the Father in Heaven is done here on earth (Galatians 2:20)—God living in us and God living through us. Jesus wants to carry-out the works of the Father through our bodies as He is the one who is able to perfectly fulfill all that God has appointed for us.

For us to experience this reality we must be willing to let go of our *Old Man* and let him have no control whatsoever in our mind or emotions; and, instead, let the Spirit of God dominate our life. We must position ourselves relationally with God such that He is our **priority** and the absolute **authority** over our lives. Then we will be able to have His *Agape* love naturally produced in our being and we will be able to love as He loves.

In 1 John we are told that anyone who does not love in this way is not truly a Christian. They may have all the window dressing of a Christian, they may go to church, read their Bibles, speak the lingo of Christianity, perform the rituals, follow the rich traditions, and even do their best to fulfill the law, the sacraments, and all the other so called religious duties; but they do not really know God.

1 John 3:11; 14,15

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

The very evidence of our Christianity is the expression of *Agape* love through our life. That is the proof that you have passed out of a life that leads to death into eternal life with the Father.

You might be wondering why I am going into such detail about the distinctions between the two types of love. Let me go at it from another angle. The presence or absence of *Agape* love serves as a living thermometer of our relationship with God and it is a thermometer that is out there and is open for everyone to see. It lets us know if we are living from the **New Creation** or if the *Old Man* has once again taken control of our life.

If we primarily produce *Phileo* love, evidenced by the fact that our relationships and expressions of love are enveloped with self interest, self care, self protection, selfishness, and an expectation of getting something in return, then it is clear that we are not making God our **priority** and the ultimate **authority** over our life; hence we are living primarily under the direction and control of our *Old Man*. As a result, we live with limited access to and limited experience with the supernatural.

This is important because it is a supernatural encounter that will cause people who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to want one. Our love is the attraction and the wonderful fragrance that draws them to Christ. When a non-believer has an encounter with the supernatural they experience an undeniable miracle. When they experience a love that is not embedded in self, but is overwhelmingly selfless, they know that as Christians we have something that they don't have and which no other religion on the face of this earth has.

In **John 17**, we are told that if we walk in unity, if we are one in fellowship, intent, and purpose, as Jesus is with the Father, then those in the world will believe that the Father sent the Son.

John 17:22-23

"I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are—I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one. Then the world will know that you sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me.

Let me just say this, the reason that Christianity has been so impotent through the years and people have had to look to other religions, to science, to humanism, and so on for their answers is because Christianity has lost touch with the supernatural. It has become a religion that is based on the performance of man and not the *Agape* love of God as He lives His life through His children. Therefore, regardless of our efforts and investments to evangelize the world with the gospel, we have been largely ineffective—especially when compared to Mormonism, and Islam.

Does this make any sense? After all, look at what we have to offer people: eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and peace with God. God offers all of this as a free gift. The only thing we require is for people to believe and bet their lives on the things that God has said about Himself and about us. In contrast, other religions require so much effort and so much performance and still they do not guarantee life eternal in the presence of God.

If you think about it, why would anyone want to live with such uncertainty when they can know that they are forgiven and have eternal life? It is confusing why Christianity is so easily discarded until we take an honest look at ourselves in the mirror.

Please understand, when as Christians we live predominately from our *Old Man*, and therefore love only with *Phileo*, we are no different than those in any other religion—regardless of our good intentions. We just have our own twist of what we think is right and wrong. But we have not authority; we have no power.

Therefore, non-believers can take it or leave it. Quite frankly, operating from our *Old Man* we simply do not provide a convincing message as there is little to no supernatural proof to support our words.

If Christianity is true, if the ostentatious claims that we make are legitimate, if people are given new life in Jesus Christ, then those who are looking into Christianity want to see it for real. If they can't see it in action, if they can't touch it, then they think we are filled with a bunch baloney and are just fixated on our exclusive little religious club that is really no different than the others.

This is tragic; but it is the current state of the "religion" of Christianity within western society. That is why I am not teaching you religion. I am not teaching you a behavior based form of living of do's and don'ts. I am teaching the power of God: Christ living in you!

I know my teachings are intense and they do not provide a lot of room for: (1) living in the blur where you can call yourself a Christian but live without its power; (2) where you just carry on in your life and you don't stop and ask God if you are living in His will in every part of your life—with no exclusions for those special parts that you want to keep to yourself; and (3) where you refuse to align your choices with the truth.

I know that my message is uncomfortable; but that is because I want you to live in truth so that others can see the love (*Agape*) of the Father in and through your lives.

Our distinction, our brand, our mark of identification, what sets us apart from everyone else and everything else in this world, is the presence and expression of *Agape* love amongst each other.

We must remember that a non-believer's impression of God comes first and foremost by watching how we treat each other. They watch how we handle the circumstances that come into our lives. They watch us in the midst of interpersonal conflict. They watch the choices we make and they study carefully. They want to know if we live what we say and if it is a natural expression of our life or if it is something we force in front of others to preserve what we want them to think about us.

But rest assured we do not fool them; they see with surprising clarity. Fundamentally, they look to see if there is anything real in our claims to know God and if they do not see the supernatural they just move on. As Christians, we are called to be the light in the darkness. That means we must be illuminated with Christ, with His love, with His power, and with His presence.

For us to live in this manner, we must walk by faith in the Spirit of God. We must live from the ***New Creation*** and absolutely refuse to let the *Old Man* have any place in our lives. The good news is that it is not important how much you have struggled with this idea. It is not important how much you still right now, today, live in denial, deception, and have wrapped up everything in your life with a clever religious justification or rationalization for why you continue to live not knowing if your are smack dab center in the will of God. It is not important how much baggage you have. It is not important how much you sin or have sinned and how much damage that has caused in your life. You don't have to live another day under the influence, power, or domination of the *Old Man*.

Here is the truth! Mark my words! Listen to me carefully! **You can have as much of God as you want right now!** Let me repeat that: you can have as much of God as you want right now! He is holding nothing back and He freely gives all of Himself. You just need to be willing to receive all that He has for you by choosing to actively believe the truth and by choosing to align your thoughts, your emotions, and your actions with what you know to be true from the word of God.

It is yours. It is for you. It is available. You are **able!** You can be the light. You can love with the love of the Father. You can be the supernatural miracle that convinces others that God sent His Son to die for the sins of the world.

His love can be expressed in all your relationships: in those that are most personal and intimate to you; as well as with those who are sitting across the room. This is the natural state of existence for a true child of God. You must believe this. If your temperature gage does not reveal the ongoing presence of *Agape* love, then you know that you must start the process we discussed last week of both ***confession*** and ***repentance***.

You must ***confess*** that the way you have chosen to live is not in alignment with the will of the Father; you must confess that *Phileo* love will never adequately reflect the heart of the Father. You must ***repent*** by refusing to make any decision for yourself that does not align with the Word of God, His voice, and His leading in your life. That includes all your interactions with those to whom God has brought into the circle of your life.

Over the next several weeks, we will study what it looks like to love with the love of God. To discover this, we are going to take a very deep dive into the heart and mind of God and examine how He relates to those whom He calls His own. Believe me, it is going to be quite surprising and as usual fairly intense.

God's love is far greater and has more faces than we could ever imagine. What we have talked about tonight is just the frame on a masterpiece. But if we can start to understand how God loves, then we will know the perfect model for how we are to love in each and every circumstance that we face.

We should then be able to discern in our lives when we are operating out of human love verses divine love. With this knowledge we will be able to honestly appraise ourselves and thereby be confronted with the truth and the opportunity to choose to let the *Agape* love of the Father flow through our lives as we align every aspect of our life with His will. We will live the supernatural! Non-believers and skeptics will no longer ask why it seems that God rarely performs miracles today as He did in the days of old; ***we will be the very miracle they seek!*** We will also bring light into the darkness that has invaded the "religion" of Christianity and hopefully God will use each of you to wake up our brothers and sisters in the Lord to this truth—to this life of power that they are supposed to be living.

To summarize, *Agape*, distinct from *Phileo*, has the following characteristics:

- It is the very expression of God's nature
- It only comes from God and is therefore perfect in its expression
- It is how He loves us
- It is how He commands us to love our brothers and sisters in the Lord
- It is available to us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our life
- It is to be our natural and ongoing state of existence
- It is absolutely supernatural
- It is the light to those who live in darkness

Let's pray.



The Faces of Love

The Jealousy of God - 2a

John 17:20-23

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony. My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father — that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me. "I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are — I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one. Then the world will know that you sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me.

I promised you that we would be diving deep into the heart and mind of God in order to get a glimpse of the many ways in which God loves so tonight we are going to jump right in.

First and foremost, it is important to understand God's objective in terms of the outpouring of His Agape love in our life and that is our **oneness** with Him. As we are told in **Romans 8:29** – we have been predestined to be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. The Father desires that you become transformed into His likeness, His character, and His nature and He works all things toward this one aim. God wants to bring you into the mystery of the Godhead. That indescribable reality where the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, although 3 separate beings with 3 very distinct roles, are all united in one purpose, one heart, and one essence.

In **John 17**, Jesus prays to the Father and asks that we would be united in the exact same way—that we would find our life and our very existence through a perfect alignment with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Consider this example of what our lives should look like.

John 14:8-11

Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and **the Father is in Me**? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but **the Father abiding in Me does His works**. "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves.

In the same way that when people met Jesus they met the Father, as the Father was abiding in Jesus and doing His work through Jesus, when people meet you they are to have an encounter with the resurrected Jesus as He lives His life in, and does His work through, your body. There is to be a **oneness** where there is no perceivable separation. In fact, from a distance when others look at you, you look like one person; unmistakably yourself yet, at the same time, unmistakably God. This is the Father's objective. Throughout this study I will be reminding you of this point over and over again for it is the bedrock for our understanding this aspect of God.

Tonight, we are going to take a look at the jealousy of God – that's right His jealousy. This might be surprising given what we have been taught about love and how it is not supposed to be jealous; but jealousy is a very important aspect of the way in which God loves us. In fact, it is a word by which He defines Himself and it is a name which He has given to Himself.

Exodus 34:14

Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

This word “jealous” is derived from the word zealous meaning to have great zeal. In the Arabic this word was used to describe one who would become intensely red. In choosing this word to define Himself God is communicating that He has unbelievable zeal towards those who are His own. If we were to try and make some big theological splitting of hairs between the words zealous and jealous we would make a big mistake and likely distort the true meaning.

In the context of how the Bible repeatedly uses this word, we are to understand this word in its most basic sense: it connotes great emotion and is the act of advancing one’s rights to the exclusion of the rights of others. In the same way a jealous fiancé attempts to make claim to the one to whom he has been betrothed, so God does with us. We are His betrothed; we are His bride to be. One day, at the end of time, that marriage will be consummated. All of us will be joined in perfect unity with Christ. Until that time, in God’s expression of His jealousy, He declares to us and to all of creation that we belong to Him and that He will protect that relationship at all costs no matter what it takes.

He Has A Plan

This brings to mind the fact that God has shown His Agape love to us first by the fact that He chose us. Out of all the people on the face of this earth, He chose us to belong to Him. In fact, we are told that He made this choice before the earth was ever created (***Ephesians 1:4***). Why did He choose you out of the billions? Why out of every generation does God elect only a handful of faithful believers? Only He knows why, but we are to consider ourselves so lucky. We are to never take this for granted. His choosing of you and me is one of the most awesome and fearful expressions of His love.

Malachi 1:2-3

“I have loved you deeply,” says the LORD. But you retort, “Really? How have you loved us?” And the LORD replies, “I showed my love for you by loving your ancestor Jacob. Yet Esau was Jacob’s brother, and I rejected Esau and devastated his hill country. I turned Esau’s inheritance into a desert for jackals.”

Yes, Jacob He loved and Esau He hated. Paul tells us that before these two brothers were born, before they had done anything good or bad, God choose one over the other. In the same way, God chose to lavish His love on all those who are true descendents of Abraham—those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. All others have been rejected.

And there is no way to get around that word “hated” regardless of how uncomfortable this idea that God “hates” makes us and no matter how much trouble we have fitting that into our theology. In the Hebrew and in the Greek it means exactly what we think it means: to hate.

Except for His love for Jacob, God never even really gives us a reasoned explanation as to why He chose one brother over the other—He just did. People have speculated and have come up with fairly reasoned conjectures but the truth is that we have no idea why He chose you, why He chose me, or any of the other flawed and frail humans that He has chosen to take into His fold. He just loves us. It is clearly not due to anything we deserve. God chooses according to His own plan, not according to our good or bad works. Paul explains it this way:

Romans 9:21-24

When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn’t he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? God has every right to exercise his judgment and his power, but he also has the right to be very patient with those who are the objects of his judgment and are fit

only for destruction. He also has the right to pour out the riches of his glory upon those he prepared to be the objects of his mercy — even upon us, whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles.

He made some of us knowing that we would be in the lineage of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and still others were created for a different purpose. Please understand your position in the family of God was not random. God was not reckless in His choosing of you; in fact, He was very purposeful. He had a plan.

Romans 8:29-31

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn, with many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And he gave them right standing with himself, and he promised them his glory. What can we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?

Personally, I agree with Paul: what can we say about such wonderful things? Well, for a start I would suggest a hearty thank you!

He Paid

Not only have we been chosen according to His mysterious plan, but we have been bought with a price. All of us were under the curse of the Law and we were slaves to sin destined to die. But Father intervened on our behalf and paid the ultimate price to redeem us from this curse.

Galatians 3:13-14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE” — in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Jesus who knew no sin became sin – He became the curse – on our behalf in order that we might be free and be made right with God so that we can be adopted as His very own children (**2 Corinthians 5:21**, **Galatians 4:1-7**). Get this, the Father literally paid for the right to have a relationship with us. And what was the price that He paid? The Father purchased us with the precious blood of His very own Son (**1 Peter 1:17-19**); and, therefore, that gives Him the right to make exclusive claim to you.

It is no wonder that with the price that He paid He is extremely jealous for our reciprocation in this relationship. He wants us to want Him just as much as He wants us. He wants nothing to stand in the way of our **oneness** with Him.

Imagine, He had to patiently watch His only beloved Son be rejected, mocked, tortured, beaten, and crushed by us—yes, by us. It was our sin that put Jesus on the cross. The Father told Him to go to the cross and Jesus willingly went; but we were the reason. **John 10:18** says that He laid down His life on His own initiative on His own authority. It was the ultimate act of Agape love and He did it so you and I can have **oneness** with Him.

He Yearns For Us

He chose us according to His plan, He paid with His the life of His Son; and as a result, He is extremely jealous for our affections and He desires our worship. Over and over He invites us to come to Him to eat of His food, to drink of His Spirit, to experience His rest, to sit at His feet and just enjoy His presence (Matthew 11:28; Luke 10:39-42; John 6:32-37, 7:37). But in each of these instances, the reason God asks us to come is not because He wants to get something for Himself; rather, it is for us. If we come then He is able to give us what He knows we need. For example,

John 7:37-38

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “If you are thirsty, come to me! If you believe in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.”

If we believe in Him, if we are willing to come and drink from His well, He will pour His Holy Spirit into our lives and that same Spirit will flow from us to those around us. Do you understand God’s motivation? It is His love for us; His love that is to flow from Him to us and through us so that it can be shown to others.

Don’t be mistaken, God is not like the so called pagan “gods” of this world who demand and who take. God is not in need of our affection or our worship. God being God is by definition complete. We can add nothing to Him and we can take nothing away from Him.

Job 35:4-8

Look up into the sky and see the clouds high above you. If you sin, what do you accomplish against him? Even if you sin again and again, what effect will it have on him? If you are good, is this some great gift to him? What could you possibly give him? No, your sins affect only people like yourself, and your good deeds affect only other people.

Please do not look so highly upon yourself. You have nothing to add to God and you can take nothing away from Him. Your affection and your worship does not magnify His glory and your anger and rebellion does not in any way diminish His glory. He is God and we are merely His creation. Understanding this should help us realize why we must live in total and absolute dependence upon Him for all things. We are needy and He is our only answer!

God yearns for our **oneness** because He loves us with a perfect love and He knows that the only way we can be safe, protected, secure, complete, and cared for is if we live smack dab dead center in alignment with the entirety of the Godhead. He knows that the only way we can experience true peace and rest is when we sit at His feet in worship.

You may not have realized it, but the reasons we sing worship songs at the beginning of each service is to give you the opportunity to make a shift in your heart and mind away from yourself and towards Him. Through music we hope to create an environment where you are not distracted and you can focus your thoughts, your affections, and your worship toward the God who loves you. Our desire is that you will use that time to align yourself with Him; and, if you do, you will be able to experience Him in Spirit and in truth as the Word of God is brought to you—for that is how we must worship Him.

Isaiah 30:18

But the Lord still waits for you to come to him so He can show you His love and compassion. For the Lord is a faithful God. Blessed are those who wait for Him to help them.

He loves us so much and wants us to be so loved. Therefore, He wants us to position ourselves relationally with Him where He is our ultimate **priority** and the absolute **authority** in our life. For when we are in alignment with Him, He is freely able to lavish His love upon us.

Jealousy in Action

What does the jealousy of God look like? First Of all, let me say, God’s relationship with Israel is a picture of His relationship with each of us. We can open our Bible and read the stories and all of God’s dealings with Israel—His judgment and His mercy—and begin to understand the passion with which He loves us.

He Fights the Enemies

First of all we can be assured that He fights on behalf of His loved ones. A little bit about the history of the nation of Israel. God birthed the nation of Israel and set them apart to be His people—His representatives on earth. He chose them to be the recipients of His mercy and a light to the nations. But instead of being a light and bringing the nations to God, they turned their backs on Him and gave their heart to foreign gods.

As a result, God raised up many nations to bring correction, discipline, and judgment to His people. But even though He sent those nations against Israel, He still expected them to show some element of mercy and kindness and not just relentlessly pummel His people. But the nations took advantage of Israel and their cruelty was unfettered. This was not ok with God and He took action and He will still take action against these nations.

Isaiah 34:1-16

Come here and listen, O nations of the earth. Let the world and everything in it hear my words. For the LORD is enraged against the nations. His fury is against all their armies. He will completely destroy them, bringing about their slaughter. Their dead will be left unburied, and the stench of rotting bodies will fill the land. The mountains will flow with their blood. The heavens above will melt away and disappear like a rolled-up scroll. The stars will fall from the sky, just as withered leaves and fruit fall from a tree.

And when my sword has finished its work in the heavens, then watch. It will fall upon Edom, the nation I have completely destroyed. The sword of the LORD is drenched with blood. It is covered with fat as though it had been used for killing lambs and goats and rams for a sacrifice. Yes, the LORD will offer a great sacrifice in the rich city of Bozrah. He will make a mighty slaughter in Edom. The strongest will die — veterans and young men, too. The land will be soaked with blood and the soil enriched with fat.

For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, the year when Edom will be paid back for all it did to Israel. The streams of Edom will be filled with burning pitch, and the ground will be covered with fire. This judgment on Edom will never end; the smoke of its burning will rise forever. The land will lie deserted from generation to generation. No one will live there anymore... Search the book of the LORD, and see what he will do. He will not miss a single detail

In Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and so on there is prophecy after prophecy of God promising that He will punish all who ever took advantage of His chosen ones. God takes His love seriously and in His zealotness He will punish others on behalf of those He loves.

He Acts to Protect His Own

The jealousy of the Lord has also resulted in serious discipline and judgment on His own people. Over and over they committed adultery with foreign God's and therefore God took action to stake His claim of ownership, to purge the darkness from His people's hearts, and to restore them to a right relationship. His jealous anger was poured out in order that the nation of Israel might know and believe that he is Lord.

In Exodus 20:6 and Deuteronomy 5:10 we are told that God will lavish His love upon those who love Him but look at what He says to those who prefer to give their affection and their worship to someone else:

Exodus 20:4-5

Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations.

This may seem extremely harsh but we must understand both the intensity of God's love and the intensity of His jealousy. He has the right; He has paid the price. God in His mercy warned His people about turning their affections; He told them not to give themselves to another. Yet, regardless of this warning, His people continually chose to rebel against Him and give their desire to foreign Gods. The history is so sad. Over and over again for thousands of years, God pleaded with them and had mercy on them; but still they chose another lover.

Jeremiah 3:2, 12, 19-20

Look all around you. Is there anywhere in the entire land where you have not been defiled by your adulteries? You sit like a prostitute beside the road waiting for a client...O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again, for I am merciful. I will not be angry forever...Return home you wayward children, says the Lord, For I am your husband...I thought to myself, I would love to treat you as my own children! I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land—the finest inheritance in the world. I looked forward to your calling me Father, and I thought you would never turn away from me again. But you have betrayed me, you people of Israel! You have been like a faithless wife who leaves her husband, says the Lord.

As a result, He sent prophet after prophet and they refused to listen. He pleaded with them and He was patient and long suffering. But finally, He had to take action and bring His people to account. He did this in order that He might preserve and save a remnant of those who had not turned their back on Him.

Isaiah 65:1-16

The LORD says, "People who never before inquired about me are now asking about me. I am being found by people who were not looking for me. To them I have said, 'I am here!' "I opened my arms to my own people all day long, but they have rebelled. They follow their own evil paths and thoughts. All day long they insult me to my face by worshiping idols in their sacred gardens. They burn incense on the rooftops of their homes. At night they go out among the graves and secret places to worship evil spirits. They also eat pork and other forbidden foods. Yet they say to each other, 'Don't come too close or you will defile me! I am holier than you!' They are a stench in my nostrils, an acrid smell that never goes away.

Look, my decree is written out in front of me: I will not stand silent; I will repay them in full! Yes, I will repay them — both for their own sins and for those of their ancestors, says the LORD. For they also burned incense on the mountains and insulted me on the hills. I will pay them back in full!

But I will not destroy them all, says the LORD. For just as good grapes are found among a cluster of bad ones (and someone will say, 'Don't throw them all away — there are some good grapes there!'), so I will not destroy all Israel. For I still have true servants there. I will preserve a remnant of the people of Israel and of Judah to possess my land.

Those I choose will inherit it and serve me there. For my people who have searched for me, the plain of Sharon will again be filled with flocks, and the valley of Achor will be a place to pasture herds. But because the rest of you have forsaken the LORD and his Temple and worship the gods of Fate and Destiny, I will 'destine' you to the sword. All of you will bow before the executioner, for when I called, you did not answer. When I spoke, you did not listen. You deliberately sinned — before my very eyes — and chose to do what you know I despise.

Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: You will starve, but my servants will eat. You will be thirsty, but they will drink. You will be sad and ashamed, but they will rejoice. You will cry in sorrow and despair, while my servants sing for joy. Your name will be a curse word among my people, for the Sovereign LORD will destroy you and call his true servants by another name. All who invoke a blessing or take an oath will do so by the God of truth. For I will put aside my anger and forget the evil of earlier days.

Oh both the terror of the jealousy of God and the beauty of His mercy. He is willing to kill in order to save. He is willing to judge in order to free. He is willing to crush in order that others may live.

At the beginning of this section, I stated that I believe that God's relationship with Israel is a picture of His relationship with us. Let me take this a step deeper. I believe that God will deal with our enemies. In fact, He promises that all those who are not true descendents of Abraham will face an eternity of punishment.

However, to those who are merciful to us and are willing to care for us even in the smallest ways, God will have a blessing (Matthew 10:42). God's treatment of our enemies is pretty much the same from the Old Testament to the New Testament. But what I think is extremely interesting is the picture of Israel and how that correlates to the *Old Man* and the **New Creation**.

The remnant, the few, the chosen are a picture of the **New Creation**. The rebellious majority are a picture of the *Old Man*. And in the same way that God was willing to bring discipline and judgment on the nation in order that He might preserve His precious remnant, God is willing to bring all sorts of circumstances in to our life for the specific purpose of warring against, crushing and destroying His enemy—the *Old Man* who always stands in opposition to Him.

I believe that this might be one of the primary purposes for the suffering that God allows in our life. If we let suffering have its perfect work in our beings, it will result in our living wholly devoted to the one who love us.

1 Peter 4:1-2

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

Through suffering, God desires to purge our sin and remove all the wrong belief and unbelief that has resulted in our giving our affections, our attention, our time, and our worship to another. He literally wants to make room in our being so that the Holy Spirit, through the **New Creation**, has unfettered access to all that we are. Again, God is extremely jealous of His Spirit and He gave that Spirit to live in us and He wants it back. He wants the Spirit along with our spirit to be united and rejoined to Him in perfect alignment. He wants **oneness**. He wants there to be no separation caused by the rebellion and adultery of the *Old Man*. James says it this way:

James 4:1-6

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"?

He chose us, He paid for us, we belong to Him, and He will do whatever it takes to bring us into this **oneness**. That is why we are told that all those who desire to live Godly, all those who desire to walk by faith in the **New Creation**, will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

God will allow all manner of persecution to come against us, but we must get our head around His purposes. It is not because He is mad. It is not because He is punishing you. It is not because He is cruel. It is because He loves you and He knows that unless the *Old Man* is crushed you will not be able to experience all the promises of God: the promises of rest, peace, joy, and abundance.

But all of these wonderful promises can be found and experienced when we embrace the reality that we are the objects of God's jealousy; and He knows exactly what it will take to bring us into **oneness**. For

some of you, it merely takes an understanding of His love and His mercy. But for others, it takes an all out war! Remember, God loves you so much that He will do whatever it takes.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-7

Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other. We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering. But God will use this persecution to show his justice. For he will make you worthy of his Kingdom, for which you are suffering, and in his justice he will punish those who persecute you. And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven.

Through suffering He is making us worthy of His kingdom. He is making us perfect and transforming us into the image of His Son. He is bringing us into a **oneness** with the entirety of the Godhead and He will continue with this process until His jealousy is appeased.

You might be wondering why God is jealous; after all 1 Corinthians 13—the famous love chapter—says that Agape love is not jealous. At first that may seem like a contradiction but believe me it is not. This is simple to understand. When I say I love ice cream or I love my dog Max, I do not mean that I want to marry the ice cream or exchange vows with my dog. But due to the context you understand that I really enjoy eating ice cream and that Max is a great dog. So context determines the meaning.

Therefore, we have to remember this when we study 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter is not meant to stand on its own. Sure it is poetic and beautiful and makes for great placards and greeting cards, but it is to be specifically understood in light of Chapters 12 and 14, as well as the rest the letter to the Corinthians.

In this letter, Paul is dealing with a church that is in conflict and is total chaos. They are all caught up in the flesh and trying to determine who is more important and who is more blessed of God. They were making comparisons with each other based on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So Paul writes Chapter 12 and sets forth the premise that the gifts of the Spirit are just that—gifts; therefore, no one should boast. They are distributed according to the will of the Spirit for the purpose of building up the entire body of Christ.

Then in Chapter 14 Paul talks about the orderly use of the gifts and how everything is to be used for the purpose of edifying others and not lifting up of self. It is in the midst of this context that we find Chapter **13**. In this Chapter, Paul makes it clear that it does not matter how many gifts a person has, because if He does not have Agape love He is nothing.

In context, the jealousy that Paul talks about is more akin to envy—the wanting of what someone else has—their gifts, their ministry, their calling, their position, their title, etc; and the point he makes is that Agape love is not filled with envy and self seeking desire. Their jealousy is fundamentally different than the jealousy of God which is not based on envy or self seeking desire; rather God merely wants us to be safe, happy, complete, and fulfilled and He knows that only happens when we are intimately connected to Him. The motive makes the difference.

God is a jealous God; jealous is His name. He chose us according to His plan and He loves us with a jealous love and it is a love that will never stop loving. He will continually be involved in our lives with the maniacal focus of bringing us into Him. What can we say about such wonderful things as these?

Let's pray.



The Faces of Love

The Jealousy of God - 2b

Last week we studied the reality that God is a jealous God, His name is jealous; and, therefore, He loves us with a jealous love. This may seem strange to you, but He has good reason for His jealousy:

- If you are a believer, if you have accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, then your place and position in the family of God is not a random accident, but it was a carefully designed plan that was executed perfectly by the entirety of the Godhead. He established this plan before the worlds began and it was then, before you even existed, that He chose you out of the myriads of people that have ever lived to be his own.
- He knew you in advance; He knew everything about you—both good and bad. Still, He chose you to be conformed into the image of His Son.
- Then He paid for the right to adopt you into His family and bring you into the mystery of the Godhead. He literally paid for the right to have a relationship with you. He paid with the precious blood of His own Son who gave up His life in order that you might live and experience **oneness** with Him. It did not matter that you were a sinner, He was still willing to pay the price and He required nothing of you when He made that decision.
- Now, because He made a plan, because He chose you, even though you were unworthy to be chosen, because He paid the ultimate price to be in relationship with you, He is very jealous of your affections.
- God's jealousy however is not self-seeking or rooted in any form of selfishness. It is rooted in His absolute love for you. He wants your affections not because you can add anything to Him by giving Him your affection—likewise you cannot diminish His glory one iota by your rebellion and stubbornness—but He loves you so much that He knows that the only way you are going to be safe, cared for, protected, and complete is when you find your life in Him.
- He desires your worship and your affection because when you are positioned relationally in alignment with His will, then He is able to lavish His love and His mercy all over you. That is why it is so important to position yourself relationally with God such that He is your ultimate **priority** and the absolute **authority** over your life. This is the key to experiencing all of God. If you can get this one point and draw near to Him, He promises He will draw near to you.

We can look at the ways in which God has expressed His jealousy towards Israel and begin to understand how He relates to us. His relationship with Israel is a picture of His relationship with us as individuals and as a collective whole.

God's jealous is demonstrated on two fronts: 1) how He deals with the foreign enemies of Israel; and 2) how He deals with internal enemies amongst His own people. With regard to the foreign enemies, suffice it to say that God always holds them accountable for how they treat His people. Even when He sends them against His people as a form of discipline and correction, He still requires these foreign nations to show mercy and compassion. He promises judgment on any nation that takes advantage of Israel.

With regard to the internal enemies, God is willing to pour out His anger and judgment on the nation in order to purge from His people those whose hearts were given to idolatry; while at the same time preserving a precious remnant of true believers.

It did not matter what God had done for His people. It did not matter how many times He saved them from distress or how much He blessed them, they constantly gave their hearts to other so called gods. They gave their affection, their attention, their priority, and their worship to foreign gods and allowed these so called gods to be the authority in their lives. What they did not realize is that these were not really gods at all, but the power behind these so called pagan "gods" were merely demonic spirits (**1 Corinthians 10:20**).

As a result, God warned Israel, begged them, pleaded with them to repent and return to the one who truly loves them; but they refused. So God sent nation after nation to judge Israel in an attempt to get them to call out to Him for help. He sent prophet after prophet to tell them what He was going to do if they continued in their rebellion. But they rejected the voice of God.

In response, God brought devastating judgment on the nation and sent them in exile to Assyria and Babylon. He did this so He could purge the cancer, so to speak. He wanted to root out of His people all that kept them from abiding with Him. Yet, in all the death and mayhem, He preserved a precious remnant of true believers. During their time in exile, He protected them and allowed them to prosper and find favor in the eyes of the foreign kings. Eventually, He brought these faithful ones back to their own land so they could be free and once again align their hearts with the one who loves them.

The history of Israel provides us understanding of how God's jealous love is poured out on our lives. We have been chosen according to God's plan; we are the precious few out of all the people that have ever lived on this earth to be given the privilege of being in the family of God. This should give us cause for great awe and even fear; yet we so often live in rebellion and idolatry.

You may ask, "how do we do this, we are not worshiping strange god's." When we allow anything or anyone to be a **priority** over our pursuit of knowing God, when we allow anything or anyone else to be the **authority** in our lives (including ourselves), we are substituting those things, those people, those relationships, for God.

As a result, our lives are for the most part spiritually impotent. We may have all the trappings of Christianity but we live without its power. We live without experiencing the promises that God made to us of rest, peace, joy and abundance.

Please understand that God desires us to not only experience Him in all things; He wants His love to flow from Him through our lives to others. But this can't be done unless we are in alignment with His will. Therefore, God tries to woo us by reminding us how much He loves us. He brings us His word to show us how to walk by faith—how to actively believe the truth.

He also brings other people in our lives to instruct and guide us. But eventually, if we continue in our rebellion, in any area of our life, He will go to war against our *Old Man* and He will allow all manner of suffering and persecution in our lives in order to purge the wrong belief and unbelief that has infected us like a cancer. He wants to crush and remove everything that is a barrier to our **oneness** with Him.

This is the jealous love of God. And He will do whatever it takes to bring you into a **oneness** with Him and a **oneness** with your brothers and sisters in the Lord. This is the same kind of jealous love that will be expressed through you towards others when you align yourself up with the will of God. Our relationships with our brothers and sisters in the Lord should fundamentally represent the heart of Jesus, and that is our **oneness!** In **John 17** Jesus said: "My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father." That is the goal, our collective oneness with the mystery of the Godhead.

But follow me on this line of thinking. The only way for us to fulfill this objective is if we collectively walk in the Spirit of God. Agape love is a fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22**); therefore, our heart, mind, and soul must be in alignment with God and His will in order for us to express this love to others. We must individually and collectively walk by faith actively believing the truth about God, about ourselves, about each other, about the **New Creation** and the *Old Man*, and so on. We must know the truth of the Word of God, we must believe the truth, and we must choose to align our decisions with what that truth. This will result in the Holy Spirit, through the **New Creation**, living in and through our lives.

God's jealousy is rooted in a selfless love—a love that desires us to be positioned relationally in alignment with Him such that He is able to lavish us with His tender mercies. In the same way, our desire for each other is to be rooted in relationship and we are to have a jealous love for each other. We are to want our brothers and sisters in the Lord to find themselves positioned relationally with God such that they hear His voice, they know how He leads them, they know His will for their life, and they walk in it and experience the fullness of His love.

Romans 12:9

Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand in the side of good.

When we hate what is wrong (the things and relationships that will damage the lives of our brothers and sisters in the Lord), and we stand for what is good (all that will draw them closer to the Lord) we are expressing the jealous love of the Lord. In fact, as you personally grow closer and closer into **oneness** with both God and your brothers and sisters in the Lord, and your life is aligned with His will, you will find that you naturally begin to hate the things in someone's life that will lead them to eventual damage, destruction, and pain. You will want the ones you love to make choices that are good that are in alignment with the will of God for their life; for it is only then that you know that your loved ones will be safe, protected, cared for, and secure.

Notice, I said the will of God for their life. This kind of love does not impose its own will or its own opinion of what is good or bad on someone else, but it seeks to understand how God is leading the other person, how God has spoken to them, and desires to see them walk in His will.

This is true Christianity, this is real love. This is not just the fake kind of plastic love that we have experienced so often within the "Religion" of Christianity where people act nice and loving on Sundays but never really care about what is happening with you; much less be willing to get their hands dirty in the details of your life.

God's jealous love, hence our motivation, is about our **oneness**—the Spirit of God in each of us being united together and moving together in alignment to fulfill the will of the Father. Further, our **oneness** is about our protection; our collectively being in that place where God can lavish His love upon us.

Don't confuse what I am saying. We are not to be sin hunters; we are not to be running around pointing the finger at everyone's sin; that would not be love. But if God has brought us into relationship with someone (which by the way is the first requirement since God works through relationships and His appointments for our life), and we see that they are beginning to walk a dangerous path, we have an obligation of love to get involved. Sometimes that involvement is gentle and supportive and sometimes that involvement is tough and hard—but either way it is necessary.

Here is a word picture of what this might look like. If you break bones in your foot, your ability to function normally is severely impaired. You cannot run and jump and for a time you can forget playing any sports. If you leave it and it sets in a broken position, you will likely have some level of impairment the rest of your life, including pain resulting from stressing your other bones, joints, and muscles beyond their state of normal operation.

That is why it is imperative to do something to prevent further damage. Sometimes that may require you to just tape up your injury, sometimes a splint will do, but other times it is necessary to break it further so you can set it properly. The immediate experience will be pain, but the end result will be healing, and your body will once again be able to function normally and move as one unit. The point being God will do whatever is necessary to achieve **oneness**.

Romans 16:17-19

And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things that are contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord; they are serving their own personal interests. By smooth talk and glowing words they deceive innocent people. But everyone knows that you are obedient to the Lord. This makes me very happy. I want you to see clearly what is right and to stay innocent of any wrong. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

These verses provide an example of how God's jealous love is to be expressed through us to others in order to protect and foster the **oneness** He desires.

1. Paul shows affection and kindness in his appeal. "Dear brothers and sisters" are terms of endearment and love. He did not approach them in a harsh or insensitive manner; rather, he appealed to the relationship they share.
2. Paul tells them to be alert and to keep guard. This means that we are to look out for each other. If you see one of your brothers or sisters being led down a path that will lead to destruction, and God has brought you into a relationship with them such that they are your appointment from the Father, throw your body in front of that train. Help them see the error and the ensuing damage that will result if they continue in the direction they are going.

Here in Boulder we live in a moss-pit of variant religious beliefs and open cultural relativism. Pretty much everything goes and everything is tolerated except true Christianity. People here are quite vocal and adamant about their beliefs. They don't just let you be, they want you to be like them. In fact, that is the ticket to being accepted into any of the social circles here in Boulder.

Add to the mix that many of you attend a very liberal institution that wants to mold and shape you with instruction that is contrary to what we know to be true in the word of God. Therefore, we must watch out for each other. We must continually encourage each other in the truth. We must not let any lie establish a foothold in our minds or our emotions. We must not become idolaters and adulterers in the same way as the nation of Israel by giving our affection, our attention, our time, and our emotions to something or someone other than our Lord Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews instructs us accordingly:

Hebrews 12:14-17

Try to live in peace with everyone, and seek to live a clean and holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. ***See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God***; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

The point is that we have a responsibility to each other. We are to watch out for each other. God has created us as one body and He expects us to care for each other and make sure that no one falls short. We are not to be driven by an obsession with other people's sin. God forbid! We are to hate what sin does to someone. Our motivation is to be our ***oneness*** with Christ; whereby, we earnestly desire the Spirit that is within our brother or sister in the Lord to be in unity with the Spirit that lives in us, all in perfect alignment with the entirety of the Godhead.

3. Notice that Paul also does not act all overly religious and sensitive by carefully couching his words to make sure that he does not offend those teachers; rather, he speaks straight up and tells the truth—they do not love with Agape love for they seek their own personal interests and they are bent on deception. Paul makes no bones about it and does not give them any "extra-credit" for being nice people. He merely says they are teaching lies and their motivation is rooted in "self-love" not selfless love.

From Paul's perspective, everything is at risk, lives are at stake, hearts are vulnerable; therefore, with the zealotry of God, he deems it absolutely necessary to be straight forward, aggressive, and call these people out for who and what they really are. This is often what it looks like when we speak the truth in love.

We saw Jesus do this many times in his encounters with the Pharisees. Keep in mind, Jesus did not do this in a letter; rather, His encounters were face to face and usually before a broad public gathering. In ***Mark 12:24*** Jesus told these so called "experts" on God that they did not even understand the scriptures

or the power of God. In Matthew 15:1-4 He told them that they transgress the commandment of God for the sake of their traditions. He said that they merely honor God with their lips but their hearts were far from Him. In Matthew 23:1-36, in front of an enormous crowd, He called out the Pharisees' hypocrisy, stated that they pervert the word of God, they pursue their own glory, they have contempt for true believers, and they blatantly disregard the true law of God. And just to cap it all off, in John 8:44, Jesus tells the religious rulers of His day that they were sons of their father the devil and that they love to do the evil things that he does.

So there are times when the stakes are high and spiritual lives of others are at risk, that it is absolutely necessary for us to speak the honest *unexaggerated* truth, even if it means that someone's feelings might get hurt and even if we have to go toe to toe with the religious leaders of our day.

Believe me, if you live and walk by faith, if you teach others what it means to walk by faith in the Spirit of God, the battle will come to you. You will come face-to-face with all sorts of opposition from those within the "Religion" of Christianity—those who are convinced that you are a threat to their kingdom.

It is sad, but the truth is that many people are in ministry for a job, the position, the title, the money, the lifestyle, and the power that they have over others; as a result, they feel threatened—as if they are losing control—when you teach others that they can know the will of God for their own life and that they must follow it with reckless abandon. So, yes, there will be times when it will be necessary to fight back and speak the truth when you see someone of authority push their own agenda on your brother or sister in the Lord because they are not truly serving Christ.

4. Paul clearly hates that these teachers are taking innocent people and causing divisions within the body and upsetting their faith. Therefore, he instructs the Romans to "*stay away*" from these individuals and have nothing to do with them. This is consistent with the instruction Paul gave in **Romans 12:9** where he says to hate what is wrong.

In the Greek this word hate means that we are to actively, continually, and utterly detest what stands in opposition to the truth. We are not to be controlled or manipulated by any misplaced sense of moral or religious obligation to those who teach things that are contrary to the truth about God. This is important to understand, just because a person holds a title or a position of prominence within Christianity does not mean that we have an obligation to them; we may still need to "*stay away*".

2 John 10, 11

If someone comes to your meeting and does not teach the truth about Christ, don't invite him into your house or encourage him in any way. Anyone who encourages him becomes a partner in his evil work.

We are to watch out for each other and refuse to expose ourselves to errant teaching. We are to have nothing to do with those who are not teaching the truth about Jesus. This is serious business. The reason this kind of care and protection is so important is that John tells us in the immediately preceding verse that if we wander beyond the teaching of Christ, it will impact our ongoing fellowship with God (**1 John 9**). In other words, if you believe error, your *Old Man* will control your mind and emotions and your connection with the Spirit of God through the **New Creation** will be muted.

From an outsider's perspective, I can understand how when we avoid such people and have nothing to do with them it will look unloving and rude. But from the eyes of God's jealous love, it is the right thing to do. God's first priority is protecting His own, and that is Paul's priority in this instruction. It does not matter if others do not agree with this choice, it does not matter whose feelings get hurt, and it does not matter if they come against you, "*stay away*" from those who pervert and distort the truth for their own advantage.

So the expression of God's jealous love in and through us, towards our brothers and sisters in Christ, involves us hating what is wrong, standing for what is right, and watching out for each other so that no one falls short. Another expression of God's jealous love is seen in the context of church discipline and the relational boundaries that are sometimes necessary for us to establish.

To understand this I want to again go back to Israel's history. Due to their adulterous rebellion and their refusal to turn from their sin, no matter how many times God sent prophets to warn them of his ensuing discipline, God finally had to remove His people from their land and separate them from His presence. He had most of the northern kingdom exiled by Assyria, and the remnant of Israel and the Southern Kingdom exiled by Babylon. This separation was necessary to bring about a destruction of those whose hearts did not belong to God and to purify the hearts of those who called on the name of the Lord.

What this picture tells us is that there will be times when it is necessary to separate yourself from a person who predominately lives from their *Old Man* even though they are a believer. This is not something that we do haphazardly; rather, it is the kind of decision that must be made carefully and with the wisdom of God. God gives us instruction as to when this kind of action is necessary and later on we will see how Paul applied this principal in dealing with the church at Corinth.

Matthew 18:15-17

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.

The net of this instruction is that when a person chooses to live from their *Old Man* and their life is given over to sin, it may be necessary to separate from that person after they have been given multiple opportunities to confess and repent—which, if they do, will be reflected in the decisions they make to change the way they live.

I believe the reason for this instruction is 2 fold. First it protects you. If you associate with those who are given over to the world (whether they are believers or unbelievers) you will quickly find that you are unequally yoked. The result will be that they will either have a corrupting influence on your life or you will bring light into their life. But do not be deceived; the status quo will not remain! There is no middle or neutral ground; either you will be conformed or they will be transformed—one or the other will happen.

Remember our study in **Romans 6** and **12:1-2**. You become a slave to whomever you present yourself, either to the world as a slave to sin or to God as a slave to righteousness. And by their respective power, either the world will conform you or God will transform you, but either way you are just a passive recipient of that work. Your only influence on the outcome is the decision you make regarding to whom you present yourself.

If you are hanging out with those who are beholden to the world, unfortunately, the odds are against their transformation; and if history holds true, they will have a corrupting influence on your life. If you are going to hate what is wrong and stand for what is good, then separation might be required to protect and preserve your fellowship with the Lord.

Second, exile sends a very strong message of love and of the need to repent. When a person surrenders to their *Old Man* there are real spiritual and practical consequences. Suddenly they will find that their fellowship with God is cut off as they have moved out of that place where they are positioned to hear His voice in their life. In addition, their fellowship with their friends within the body of Christ will wane either naturally or through those in the body following the instruction in Matthew 18.

You may be thinking, why is this ok? Why is putting someone out and separating from them even wise? After all, if we are not there to help them and look out for their spiritual life, then they will definitely fall. It sounds harsh and so unloving. Remember, the goal of all of God's expressions of jealousy is to bring us into oneness with Him. The objective of exile is not punishment and cruelty. God will use the separation as a tool to crush that person's connection to the world and to their Old Man. He will use the time in the desert, so to speak, to remind them of how refreshing it is to be in alignment with God and with His people.

Besides, it is important to take Matthew 18:15-17 in context. This passage of scripture is bookend by the stories of the lost sheep and the unforgiving debtor. I do not believe that this is accidental. God reminds us that first and foremost His heart is one of love and that He will go to the ends of earth to search for the one lost sheep. In fact Jesus says in verse 14: "*it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these*

little ones should perish."

Therefore, He instructs us to go to a brother or sister and confront them privately in an attempt to win them back. Then if that does not work, we are to go with others, and again out of a heart of love and jealousy for the Spirit that is within them, attempt to bring them back into alignment with God. Then if that does not work, we are to take the matter to the entire fellowship of believers. It is only after you take all these steps, and if a person still decides to walk in rebellion, that you are to exile them and treat them as a pagan or corrupt tax collector.

By the way, this is where the second bookend comes into play and that is the story of the unforgiving debtor. In this story, Jesus tells of a man who owed His king a great ransom but he was unable to pay. After much pleading, the king decided to forgive this man this great debt. You would think this man would be extremely gracious and humble after the mercy that he was shown. But no, he had a friend who owed him just a fraction of what he owed the king and when that man was unable to pay he had him, and his family, thrown in jail.

What an atrocity. When the king found out what this man did, he was furious. He said: "Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you? (Matthew 18:23-35).

The point is that if God has been so gracious to forgive us of all our sin, then should we not be overwhelmingly gracious to the pagan and corrupt tax collector? Do you understand? Exile does not mean that we have to be mean to the person and hate them. On the contrary, we are to be merciful and loving; we are just not to extend to that person the place of fellowship, intimacy, and trust that we are to share with those who truly seek God. We are to treat them as an unbeliever, as someone who needs to understand the love, mercy, compassion of the Father; and we are to love them accordingly. Sadly, however, this does mean that we erect relational boundaries, because we cannot trust them with our hearts; at least not until they confess and repent.

Paul was forced to walk through this process with a member of the church at Corinth. There was this guy who was given over to his *Old Man* and was living in a sexually immoral relationship with his Father's wife. This kind of sin was absolutely unheard of even amongst the pagans. The church at Corinth was errantly being tolerant of this man's sin and Paul therefore took action.

1 Corinthians 5:1-11

I can hardly believe the report about the sexual immorality going on among you, something so evil that even the pagans don't do it. I am told that you have a man in your church who is living in sin with his father's wife. And you are so proud of yourselves! Why aren't you mourning in sorrow and shame? And why haven't you removed this man from your fellowship?

Even though I am not there with you in person, I am with you in the Spirit. Concerning the one who has done this, I have already passed judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus. You are to call a meeting of the church, and I will be there in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus will be with you as you meet. Then you must cast this man out of the church and into Satan's hands, so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved when the Lord returns.

How terrible that you should boast about your spirituality, and yet you let this sort of thing go on. Don't you realize that if even one person is allowed to go on sinning, soon all will be affected? Remove this wicked person from among you so that you can stay pure. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. So let us celebrate the festival, not by eating the old bread of wickedness and evil, but by eating the new bread of purity and truth.

When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or who are greedy or are swindlers or idol worshipers. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. What I meant was that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a Christian yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or a drunkard, or a swindler. Don't even eat with such people.

Paul's instruction may seem harsh, but Paul felt it was necessary because this man was putting the rest of the body at great risk. Paul knew that this man's choices would soon start to impact the others and corrupt their lives as well. Paul knew that their tolerance would slowly mutate into permissiveness; it may start small and unnoticeable, but soon others will be given over to the desires of their flesh. Once that kind of infection starts it can kill a church.

Now, even though Paul's approach sounds harsh, you have to read the rest of the story because it had its intended purpose as an expression of God's jealous love: 1) protection of the body and 2) sending the strong message of the need for the exiled one to repent. Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 2:4-8

How painful it was to write that letter! Heartbroken, I cried over it. I didn't want to hurt you, but I wanted you to know how very much I love you. I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt your entire church more than he hurt me. He was punished enough when most of you were united in your judgment against him. Now it is time to forgive him and comfort him. Otherwise he may become so discouraged that he won't be able to recover. Now show him that you still love him.

Even though Paul's instruction was straight forward and bold, it broke his heart. This was not easy, it was not fun, and he was not acting with a proud or arrogant heart. He loved the Corinthians with God's jealous love, but it hurt. Notice how God's heart is always towards restoration of the sinner and the protection of the **oneness** that He desires. He absolutely will take harsh measures to protect those who truly love Him even if that means temporary exile for others.

As we get ready to close, I also want you to understand some practical truths that were very hard for me to learn. Sometimes exile is needed because no matter how hard you may want someone to surrender to the Lord, you cannot make it happen for them. They must choose. You can burn up so much energy wanting God for them that you are the one who ultimately gets hurt.

Until you grow in your **oneness** with God, it is extremely difficult to know the difference, on the one hand, between the appointments that God has for you in the lives of others, and on the other hand, the situations that you get yourself into while being led by your emotion and desire for someone—even if that desire is based on your love for that person.

If you are being led by the Lord, if your involvement in someone's life is an assignment from the Father, you will be able to do what you need to do in another's life, and God will provide the strength and the wisdom for you to complete the task.

Further, your instruction and counsel will be in alignment with the will of God for their life. But if you operate out of our own will, your own desires, and your emotion, even if you have good intentions, you will still do more damage than good to both them and to your own fellowship with God. Remember, in God's economy, good intentions don't buy you any extra credit: either you are doing His will in your life or you are doing your own. There is no middle ground. Jesus says it this way:

Matthew 12:30

He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.

Let's gather with the Lord – let's stay in alignment with His will where we only do what He tells us to do, we only say what He tells us to say, and we only go where He tells us to go. Let's not just pretend to love each other. Let's really love each other. Let's hate what is wrong, stand on the side of good and love each other with the jealous love of the Lord.

Let's pray.

The Faces of Love

The Jealousy of God - 2c

Well I thought I was going to move on to the next aspect of the love of God, but apparently God had more for me to say about His jealous love. I know that last week was extremely intense and depending upon your personal filters through which the message passed, it may or may not have settled in the way that aligns with the truth.

First of all let me remind you that we are talking about the faces of love—the different ways in which God’s love is expressed towards us. Since God is love (**1 John 4:8,16**), then all that He does in and to our lives is an expression of that love. We may not fully understand His love and we most certainly will not like all the ways in which that love is expressed; but, either way, regardless of our limitations, and our inability to comprehend all of God, it is still an expression of God’s love.

Sure, I can be honest, the material I have taught on the jealousy of God is not easy, and it is extremely hard to digest. On the one hand, we like the idea that God is jealous of us and is willing to pour out His wrath and judgment on all our enemies—all those who stand in opposition to His chosen ones. On the other hand, we shudder at the idea that God is so jealous to have **oneness** with the Spirit that He has given to live within us that He will pour out His wrath and judgment upon us.

From a purely human perspective, we tend to want nothing to do with His jealous love, and we tend to resist even the idea that He might wage war against all the things in our life that stand between us and our **oneness** with Him. This face of love seems mean, cruel, harsh, violent and just flat out unloving. We would rather Him be gentle, kind, and bring any needed correction with a soft hand. Tonight I hope to convince you that this kind of thinking is fleshly and is absolutely ludicrous.

We are first going to go back to some basic Biblical truths that are so important for us to not only understand, but to accept and believe. I find that it is necessary to repeat certain truths over and over again until it gets a firm place underneath our thick skin and becomes embedded in the core of our being. If we can do this, it will be extremely hard for the enemy to ever tempt us with a misconception of the Father’s love.

Before we jump into these “Biblical truths” let me just say that you can either choose to believe them to be true and align the choices in your life accordingly, or you can continue down your path until God decides to help you learn through **experience** that these are in fact the truth.

Since I have taken the long route of experience, trust me when I tell you that it is far easier to choose to believe them to be true and to fashion your life such that it aligns up perfectly with these truths. Experience is good, but it is generally quite painful. Unfortunately, I did not have anyone to explain to me and help me understand these truths so God took me on this long journey to remove the scales from my eyes so that I can see.

1. Our flesh, our *Old Man*, is an enemy of God, and there is nothing good that dwells within him. Therefore, he must die!

Galatians 5:17

The *Old Sinful Nature* **loves to do evil**, which is **just opposite** from what the Holy Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are opposite from what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, and your choices are never free from this conflict.

Romans 7:18

For I know that **nothing** good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but he doing of the good is not.

Just stop a moment and take in the reality of what these two verses are saying. I know that we are still so attached to our flesh, but our *Old Man* is wicked and there is nothing good about him. In fact, he is so wicked and stands in such opposition to the ways of God that he is not even capable of being redeemed. That is why God's plan of redemption does not include your *Old Man*. That is why He is not interested in any attempts on your behalf to be good, holy, religious, charitable, or even loving.

You must understand that everything that originates from your *Old Man* is corrupted in some shape or form with self-love and self-interest. In fact, our spiritual condition, outside of a relationship with God in the Spirit, is even more desperate than you can imagine. It is not an exaggeration to say that your *Old Man* hates and loathes God with the vilest of intent.

Romans 8:5-8

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

There is no escaping it and we must come to grips with this reality. All that is in us which does not originate from God is hostile toward Him and is in total rebellion, for it seeks its own will and not the will of the Father. Thus, it can never be pleasing to God. That is why a person must be born-again and must receive a new nature in order to even just begin to have fellowship with God.

Remember, when you turn your heart to Jesus, He will imbue you with a new aspect to your being—a new nature, which we call the **New Creation**. It is in this place that He dwells and the **New Creation** is created in God's likeness: righteous, holy and true (Ephesians 4:23).

If this is our reality, if this is the truth, if this is our condition outside of the Spirit of God, why would we ever want any part of our *Old Man* to remain? Why would we hold on to it? Why would we not come running to God and ask Him to purge this enemy out of our beings and render him ineffective in our lives? Its control in our life only leads to death; yet, the alternative is life and peace. Is this even really a choice?

I believe that one of the reasons we struggle with this so much is because the enemy has done a great job of deceiving us and getting us to believe things that are not true.

For example, when we hear the words *Old Man*, our flesh, or hostile and evil, we naturally think of things that are bad and what we would consider blatantly sinful. But that is the deception and the deviation from truth. Get this, anything good or bad, any good deed or act of evil, any natural thought or hateful thought, are in effect all the same in God's economy. If it does not originate from Him and is not something that flows from the Holy Spirit in the **New Creation**, it will not be in alignment with His will and by its very definition will be in opposition to the desires of the Spirit.

We are to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4) and thereby only do what He tells us to do, only say what He tells us to say, and only go where He tells us to go; all else leads to death.

Do you understand that God loves you so much and so desires that **oneness** that we have been talking about that He is simply not content with leaving you alone to your own devices? He desires you to experience life and peace; therefore, He is willing to wage war with your flesh, your *Old Man*, and crush its control in your life.

Think of your flesh as a vicious cancer. If left untreated it will destroy all your healthy cells and you will literally be eaten alive from the inside out. In order to eradicate this disease you must undergo some intense treatment that is aimed at killing and destroying all those rogue and destructive cells. The goal of this treatment is twofold: total obliteration of the bad cells in order to give you a chance at truly living. This is how we are to view God's jealous love. This is how we are to view the suffering and persecution that He allows in our life; if we let it do its perfect work, we will cease from sin. James and Peter both address this:

James 1:2-4

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

1 Peter 4:1,2

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

The reason God is willing to wage war against our *Old Man* and take action that to us seems unloving, cruel, mean and unkind is because He wants to use these experiences to break the hold that the *Old Man* has on your life, so that you live the rest of your life here on earth for the will of the God. In addition, He wants to make you perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Can you imagine, lacking in nothing? This has to be what Jesus was talking about in **John 10:10** when He said that He came to give us life and give it abundantly. What freedom, what stability, and what security can be ours. Although the path to this life is the destruction of our flesh; we are instructed to have the same attitude towards this process that Christ had. Remember, He voluntarily gave us His life. No one took it from Him.

John 10:17-18

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.

Jesus gave up His life in order to take it up again. All His suffering and humiliation were necessary. We are told in **Isaiah 53** and **Hebrews 12:2** that the reward far exceeded the grief and the pain. Through Jesus' suffering He opened the way for us to have relationship with Him. We are His passion, we are His obsession! Therefore, He not only considered His humiliation and suffering necessary, He was **satisfied** with His decision to give up His life. Let's look at this predictive passage in Isaiah.

Isaiah 53:10-12

But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have a multitude of children, many heirs. He will enjoy a long life, and the LORD's plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins. I will give him the honors of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death. He was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners.

In the same manner, we are to want to give up our life in the flesh; we are to want our *Old Man* crushed, in order to truly live by the Spirit in the **New Creation**. It is only then that we will be **satisfied** and that hunger and thirst in our soul will be quenched.

That is why we are to consider it joy when we encounter various trails because we can be assured that if we let each trial have its perfect work that we will be taken deeper and deeper into this mystical **oneness** with God. We are not to resist and fight the work that the Lord wants to do to bring us closer to Him; we are to have the same mind that Christ had and realize that the reward far exceeds the sacrifice.

2. Don't worry; God always puts a limit on His affliction.

Jeremiah, one of the great prophets in the Bible, prophesied immediately preceding and during the time of the Babylonian invasion. During this time, God took Jeremiah through a horrible ordeal and he documented his journey in the book of Lamentations or the book of weeping. Jeremiah's ordeal ranks up there with one of the most difficult displays of God's jealous love that we see in the Bible. I think it is worth our while to see not only what that experience was like, but also how Jeremiah viewed what God was doing with him.

Lamentations 3:1-20

I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the LORD's anger. He has brought me into deep darkness, shutting out all light. He has turned against me. Day and night his hand is heavy upon me. He has made my skin and flesh grow old. He has broken my bones. He has attacked me and surrounded me with anguish and distress. He has buried me in a dark place, like a person long dead. He has walled me in, and I cannot escape. He has bound me in heavy chains.

And though I cry and shout, he shuts out my prayers. He has blocked my path with a high stone wall. He has twisted the road before me with many detours. He hid like a bear or a lion, waiting to attack me. He dragged me off the path and tore me with his claws, leaving me helpless and desolate. He bent his bow and aimed it squarely at me. He shot his arrows deep into my heart. My own people laugh at me. All day long they sing their mocking songs.

He has filled me with bitterness. He has given me a cup of deep sorrow to drink. He has made me grind my teeth on gravel. He has rolled me in the dust. Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is. I cry out, "My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the LORD is lost!" The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss.

This is absolutely horrible. This passage combines emotion expressed in metaphor and real events that took place in his life. You have to read the entire book of Jeremiah to track this expression to the events that he endured. But, what this man went through physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually is nothing short of abject terror. Jeremiah felt as if God had totally abandoned him, rejected him, and then came against him like an enemy.

It is clear that Jeremiah had grand visions in his head for his life and for how God was going to use him; and he saw all those visions just shattered. This man's heart was crushed. Yet, despite this horror, the core of Jeremiah was fixed to God. Reaching down to the very center of what was in his heart, Jeremiah was able, in the midst of a living hell, somehow get perspective and realize that God was up to something and despite the pain, it was something good. Somehow, Jeremiah was able to realize that his suffering was necessary, and that when it was completed God would show unbelievable compassion according to the greatness of His love. Jeremiah continued in this passage in Lamentations 3 and said:

Lamentations 3:21-33

Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the LORD never ends! By his mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each day. I say to myself, "The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!" The LORD is wonderfully good to those who wait for him and seek him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD. And it is good for the young to submit to the yoke of his discipline. Let them sit alone in silence beneath the LORD's demands. Let them lie face down in the dust; then at last there is hope for them. Let them turn the other cheek to those who strike them. Let them accept the insults of their enemies.

For the Lord does not abandon anyone forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion according to the greatness of his unfailing love. For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow.

Remember, the reasons for the outpouring of God's jealous love in your life: He chose you out of the billions of people that have ever lived to be His own, He has a plan for your life and He wants you to fulfill all the tasks that He has assigned to you, and He purchased the right to be in relationship with you with the precious blood of His very own Son.

Therefore, in His jealous love, He wants to remove all that is in your life that interferes with the relationship that He wants to have with you. That is why He uses suffering, persecution, and many other tools to dig out those strongholds of your flesh.

The good news is that although it might be difficult, painful, and for some even over the edge harrowing, there is a goal, there is a purpose and there is a limitation to the grief that He allows in our lives.

First of all in 1 Corinthians 10:13, He promises that He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able to endure. So God knows the exact amount of heat that is necessary to purge all impurity from your life; and He is able to do that without destroying what is precious to Him. Further, the end result will be glorious and wonderful. For the Lord does not abandon anyone forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion according to the greatness of his unending love. Peter says it this way:

1 Peter 5:10

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

I love this verse. God Himself will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. That is so personal, so intimate, so loving. The God who sits over the entire universe will Himself do this work in you. Yes, the suffering, any amount of suffering, is horrible but it provides an opportunity to get more of Him. It means experiencing God lavishing His love on your life as He makes you into this unbelievable person who stands in His power, strength, and might.

The wonderful thing about enduring God's testing, submitting to His discipline, and sitting silent beneath His demands, is that you reach a place where the battle with your *Old Man* will be reduced to nothing more than mere skirmishes. Remember Peter said that those who suffered in the flesh have ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

In other words, we can reach a sort of transcendence here in this life where we walk as free men and women, bound only to the voice of the Lord in our life. This is a place of peace, rest, abundance where His load is light and His burden is easy.

3. It is your choice if you want to experience the transcendent life.

If you Love Jesus, if you desire to make Him your **priority** and the ultimate **authority** in your life, then this message is for you. He takes those who really want Him and He makes them into pure vessels of Gold. Remember, God does not force Himself upon you, He asks you to come to Him. He woos you with His love and His mercy. He wants you to want Him as much as He wants you and He wants it to be a volitional choice that you make because you have been convinced that it is the only Way and He is the only One.

If you make that choice, if you say that you want to be His possession, then He will come to you and He will complete that work. He will purposefully purge from your life all the walls of wrong belief and unbelief to which you cling and on which you have built your life. With each wall that He tears down, He will replace it with truth and with the beauty of His dwelling place.

Now I tell you this because I don't want you to be surprised; I want you to know what you can expect. I for one was caught off guard. Even though I have read all these passages and even though I understood the language, I did not have a place in my mind for it to really take hold. I had been taught that God deals with us as a gentle loving Father and that His correction is tender and compassionate. Well, that set up all these expectations in my mind for how God was supposed to behave towards me. I had Him shoved quite comfortably in this little God box that I could understand and that I was ok with emotionally.

But when God threw me into my storm and unleashed hell into my life, I was not ready for that. No one told me that it was possible for God to act that way. As a result, I was so mad and furious at God for what felt like total abandonment and purposeful torture. Like Jeremiah I was absolutely undone. However, there was this place within me at my core that held on to Him and to my hope in Him and that is all I had—just one little rope to cling to for my life.

Honestly, I wish someone would have warned me and explained to me this concept. At least then I might have been somewhat ready and not reacted with such violent opposition to God. I fought Him, I wrestled Him, and I resisted Him all to no avail. If I would have known what was going on maybe, just maybe, I might have cooperated and sat silent under His rebuke.

So consider yourself informed. Know that the purging is necessary in order to find yourself in that place of freedom, power, and abundance. It is necessary to experience that **oneness** with the Godhead.

Now what I am going to say next is merely a speculation that I am making from observation; but I do not have a hard-core scripture to validate it. But it seems to me that God reserves the hardest, scariest, and most intense experiences for those who want Him the most.

Follow me on this; since God does not force Himself upon you, the extent that you go through an experience like this has a lot to do with your desire to have all of God. If you are so in love with Him that you want nothing to separate you and your fellowship with God, He will respond to that desire and through the furnace of suffering purge every impurity from your life. This is a good thing, a very good thing!

Now if you are content to only want pieces of God, because you are afraid to either give up certain things, or because you are afraid to trust God to be all that He says He is to you, then He will not force you. He will continue to woo you and attempt to get you to grow in your desire for Him, hoping that one day you will want all of Him; but again, He will not force you.

When I think of this process a few names come to mind. Men who endured incredible suffering and persecution; and, yet, we now know them as men who knew and experienced God in very unique ways – they are our examples of faith.

Noah believed God and for over 100 years honored the voice of God in His life. He built this massive boat despite the mocking and criticism of all who knew him.

Job was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. Job's knowledge of God was unparalleled; yet, there was something missing in his understanding of God. God wanted Job to have something more; a deep understanding that only comes through personally experiencing Him. So God plunged Job into a trial that is beyond anything we could ever imagine. This was not something Job was prepared for and he definitely did not think he deserved this kind of treatment from God. After all he feared the Lord and honored him with his life.

So Job's reaction was not pretty and he demanded from God an answer as to why he had to go through such suffering. But instead of ever answering the "why," Job was privileged to receive a firsthand view of God. God showed Job things, both in the natural and the supernatural, that would help him understand the size, magnitude, power, nature, character, and awesomeness of God. As a result, Job relented of his demands and submitted himself to God. Look at his response:

Job 42:2-6

I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You ask, 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?' It is I. And I was talking about things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me. "You said, 'Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.' "I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.

I believe that Job would say that all his suffering and all his loss was all worth it in order to get a closer view of God.

Abraham was chosen by God to be the grandfather of faith; in fact, if you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are considered a true descendent of Abraham. When this man was still in steeped in a pagan culture, God asked him to leave it all behind and go to a land that God would show him and he promised to give that land to Abraham and his descendents.

In this place God promised that he would be the father of many nations and that through his seed, the Messiah would come. Abraham waited and waited for God to fulfill his promise. For years and years Abraham prayed for a Son, but God kept him waiting. This caused tremendous stress and tension both in his marriage to Sarah and in his faith. During this time, Abraham succumbed to the tension and made a serious mistake by having a child with Sarah's handmaid. In fact it was not until Abraham was 100 years old, that God allowed Sarah, who was in her nineties, to become pregnant. Can you imagine the rejoicing that took place; finally a son.

Then after all this time, God told Abraham to sacrifice his son to the Lord. Again God placed Abraham in a position of tremendous emotional, psychological, and spiritual stress. Would he honor God or would he protect his son. Fortunately, he chose to honor God and God in turn honored him and he is our primary example of what it means to have faith.

Joseph was discarded by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. He spent years as a slave and then as a prisoner in the king's jail. Yet, during this time, Joseph continued to remember God and God eventually rescued Joseph and exalted him to the highest position in Pharaoh's kingdom.

Moses, the prince of Egypt, was chased out his homeland and spent the next 40 years in the desert as a shepherd. God came down and visited this man and talked to him as if face-to-face. Over the next 40-years God took Moses through the most intense journey of suffering, blessing, pain, and peace; yet, despite all of Moses achievements and failings, what is important is how God remembers him. We are told that Moses was a friend of God.

David was a man after God's own heart. When David was merely a young lad, He was chosen by God to be the king of Israel. Yet it is believed that it was somewhere between ten and twenty years before David was finally able to take the throne.

So what happened during this time? Did David get sent off to King school where he was trained in the palace and royal chambers in all the duties and responsibilities of kingship? No David spent years running away from King Saul who was not going to let David rise to power and take away His throne. He spent years hiding in caves and wandering through the wilderness in an effort not to be caught.

Not a very glamorous life for a king. His kingdom was one of rock and dirt, and his subjects were the rebels and outcasts of Israel. But through this time of suffering and exile, God was making David in into the man that He wanted. Someone who's heart was fully devoted and singularly focused on loving Him.

Then there are the stories of **Daniel**, of **Jeremiah**, **Ezekiel**, **Hosea**, and so many others, including **Peter**, **James**, **John**, **Paul**, and the other disciples—men who considered all things as nothing in comparison to knowing God. I love the way Paul said it:

Philippians 3:8-9

Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with him.

Paul's aim in life was the same as Jesus' aim. All that is in this world, all that derives from our *Old Man* is worthless. The only thing that is really important, the one thing, is our **oneness** with the Godhead.

Are you willing? Are you holding on to areas of your life that you know you have not surrendered to God? Are there areas of truth that you have not actively believed and are not now currently walking in faith, areas that God has brought to your attention? Are you willing to say to God that you want all of Him no matter what it costs?

Let me tell you, if you make a decision to move forward in faith, you will receive an outpouring of God's jealous love and it will be worth it! God has taken me through a horrific journey and as I have told you

before, I am satisfied! I wasn't before; but now that I understand and have seen the results, I am not only satisfied but I am so thankful.

I invite you to join the company of some pretty amazing people who embraced the jealous love of God. I invite you to ask God to give you all of Him. If you do, get ready, strap on your seat belt, it will be a wild ride. But it will be a ride you will not regret. You will live in His strength, peace, rest, might, and abundance and you will be satisfied.

I thank God for His jealous love. I thank God that He was willing to wage war against my flesh. I thank God that He wants us all of us to experience **oneness** with the God head.

Let's pray.



Redefined Relationships - 3a

Matthew 8:21-22

Another of the disciples said to Him, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead."

Tonight, we are going to talk about how God, as an expression of His Agape love, redefines all our most intimate of relationships. I am going to introduce you to some ideas which for many of you may seem foreign, radical, hard-core, and even somewhat controversial. In fact, I have yet to hear mainstream Christianity approach this topic in this way. There have been a few people who tread close to these ideas, but then they turn back and resort to the standard clichés that are accepted by the majority.

I understand why they do that, the position of the majority is safe, without much controversy, and even lines up nicely with our own common sense and reason. But by now, one thing that you should begin to understand about God is that He rarely sides with the majority and His wisdom almost never lines up with our. His ways, His thoughts, and His ideas are unique and often so radical that those within the "Religion" of Christianity tend to skip over much of what He has to say because if they took what He says seriously, it would require a total transformation of their life. And few are ready for that kind of cataclysmic decision.

Jesus not only redefines our relationships, he redefines our roles and our responsibilities in relationships. Tonight, we are only going to examine how our relationships are redefined. Next week we will talk about what that means for us practically, and how our redefined relationships require us to reshape the roles and responsibilities we have towards others.

He Redefines our Relationships

I find this passage in **Matthew 8** very interesting. Since we are not really given all the information on this guy's situation, we can assume that he was saying one of two things: 1) He wanted to wait until his responsibilities at home were completed, and then he would follow Jesus anywhere He wanted him to go; or 2) his Father was actually dead somewhere, and he was on his way to conduct an extensive burial routine.

His father could have been at room temperature, but most likely this man had elderly parents and felt that he had a social, moral, and religious duty, and was obliged to care for them in their aged years. Once they died and were buried, then he would be free from this responsibility and free to follow the Lord.

Notice that Jesus did not even inquire into this man's situation; He did not show any care, sympathy, or concern. Without skipping a beat, He just told the man that nothing, absolutely nothing was more important than following God; nothing was more real and more pressing than doing what God wants done.

Jesus' response also made it clear that the spiritually dead, those who really do not have an interest in finding or following the will of God, are not our responsibility. As disciples, we are responsible to follow the voice of God in our lives; and His voice is to take a priority over our family relationships, our cultural traditions, and even our societal responsibilities.

You must understand this one statement alone turned over years and years of cultural and religious tradition in the most practical sense. After all, honoring your father and mother is one of the big 10-commandments. Yet, Jesus told this man to leave his family behind, without hesitation, and come follow Him. Mark my word, Jesus was not spiritualizing the matter, and this man did not receive it that way. He understood exactly what Jesus was requiring of him.

This is the same manner in which Jesus gathered His disciples. He walked right up to them and told them to drop their nets, leave the fishing boats, leave their business, leave their family behind, and follow. Jesus permitted no ifs, ands, or buts, He just told them to come, now! Surprisingly, we are told that they dropped everything and immediately followed the Lord (Luke 5:11; Matthew 4:20). Even Matthew, who was employed

by the Romans as a tax collector, just left his booth, left his duties, and followed Jesus (Matthew 9:9).

Jesus Himself had to confront the exact same situation in His own life. He had to decide that following the will of His Father in heaven was more important than following the desires of his earthly family. We see this on two occasions. The first was when Jesus was just a mere boy.

Luke 2:41-50

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual. After the celebration was over, they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't miss him at first, because they assumed he was with friends among the other travelers. But when he didn't show up that evening, they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there.

Three days later they finally discovered him. He was in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, discussing deep questions with them. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. His parents didn't know what to think. "Son!" his mother said to him. "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." "But why did you need to search?" he asked. "You should have known that I would be in my Father's house." But they didn't understand what he meant.

Just think of this practically. If you were a parent or a caretaker and your kid just cut out on you without saying a word, you would be so ticked off. You would be furious! From a parent's perspective, Jesus' behavior was not only disobedient, but it was rude, selfish and downright unloving. It was definitely worthy of some serious discipline; yet without missing a beat, Jesus told His parents that He placed a higher priority on being with His Father than He did on their authority.

As a parent, this would have been so confusing and disturbing; after all, Jesus was just a boy and Joseph and Mary were the adults; they were to be the ones setting the rules. But Jesus always lived only to do the will of the father (Hebrews 10:7,9).

The second occasion where Jesus made this decision occurred early on in His ministry. People were excited about what Jesus was teaching and they began to follow Him from town to town. We are told in **Mark 3:21** that when His family heard what was happening, they tried to take Him home believing that he was out of his mind.

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus' mother and brothers arrived at the house where he was teaching. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd around Jesus, and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." Jesus replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he looked at those around him and said, "These are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Once again, Jesus redefined culture, tradition, societal norms, and the very fabric of human society—the family. Not only does God have a higher **authority** and **priority** over any human relationship or human authority; our relationship with fellow believers also has, without exception, a higher priority and authority than any other human relationship we have. Wait; let me say this accurately so there is absolutely no confusion. The relationships that we share with those who know and do the will of the Father are to have a higher priority and authority in our lives than any of our other relationships. Those who make God their **priority** and the absolute **authority** in their lives are our true brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers.

So what does all this mean for us? Well the answer to this question is extremely intense. In the same way that Jesus had to decide that listening to His Father in heaven was more important than anything or anyone, we also must make the same decision. In the same way that Jesus redefined His earthly

relationships, we must be willing to similarly redefine our culture, tradition, societal norms and the very relationships that have been at the center of our lives.

This is not easy! And believe me, unless your family, your friends, your relatives, are sold out to Jesus, they will not understand. They will want you to do what they want you to do and they will have no patience for you wanting to do what God wants you to do. When you tell them that you seek the voice of the Lord and that you want to know His will in your life, in all things, they will think you are crazy. They will think you have fallen over the deep end (after all, Jesus' own family thought He was out of His mind), and they will think you are part of some strange cult. They will accuse you be being selfish, unloving, irresponsible, disobedient, rebellious, un-submissive, ungodly, and so on. They will not understand for they cannot understand. 1 Corinthians 2 says that it takes a spiritual mind to understand the ways of God.

But regardless, they will come against you and it will not be pretty. It will likely be very emotionally disturbing. Nevertheless, you are called to listen to and follow the voice of God in your life; for that is all that really matters. That is why it is so important that you make God your **priority** and the absolute **authority** in your life, for that is the only way that you will be able to hear His voice, follow His leading, and know His will.

You might be thinking right now that this is fine and dandy for Jesus. After all, being God, He was the ultimate authority and He was free to call the shots; but it is all together different for us. We have real people and real relationships that we need to care for; we have responsibilities, duties, commitments, and contracts. Besides, most of us expect to have a long life ahead of us and we need to take care of what we have to take care of, there is just no way around it. Let me just say, if this is what you are thinking (or even some variation of it) your thoughts, while good intentioned, do not align up with the Word of God.

Remember, we are called to follow Jesus' example in all things (Ephesians 5:1-2); and Jesus, knowing that we would have some serious consternation with this way of living, spoke quite clearly about His expectations of us.

Luke 14:25-33

Great crowds were following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, "If you want to be my follower **you must love me more** than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters — yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you **cannot** be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me.

But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if there is enough money to pay the bills? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of funds. And then how everyone would laugh at you! They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and ran out of money before it was finished!'

Or what king would ever dream of going to war without first sitting down with his counselors and discussing whether his army of ten thousand is strong enough to defeat the twenty thousand soldiers who are marching against him? If he is not able, then while the enemy is still far away, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace. So no one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me.

Every personal relationship, no matter how intimate, must be second to God and must be subject to the will of the Father in your life. *There are no exceptions!* You must love Jesus more than you love anyone else; and if you do, your priorities will be established by the Father. What you do, what you say, and where you go will be directed by the Holy Spirit, and it will not be controlled or manipulated by convention, tradition, culture, or by any person in your life.

I know that this teaching flies in the face of most of what we have been taught in church about such things as marriage, family, commitment, and so on. But you simply are not to love anyone or anything else more than you love God, and based on what Jesus said, your commitment to this truth will be put to the test. Before you make the decision to be full-on sold out for Him, you must count the cost because it will cost you. He will take your decision to follow Him seriously; and, in His jealous love, He will allow all sorts of relational trauma and turmoil in your life to prove out your faith, to crush your *Old Man*, to redefine your

relationships, and to draw you near to Him.

Understand that at the very core of your being He wants all that you are to be subject to His voice and His voice only! He knows that it is only then that you will be safe, protected, secure, and established in His love. Therefore, everything and everyone must take a seat behind God and His will for your life.

Now what about marriage? Surely there must be a marriage exemption to this rule? The priority of a married couple must be each other, and the family that they form. After all, marriage is ordained by God; thus, prioritizing marriage must in and of itself must be the will of God.

Well that certainly sounds logical, rational, and fits nicely within the religious “marriage” box with which we are comfortable. But remember, Jesus said that you must be willing to give up everything, and He made no exceptions. There may be times in your life when God asks you to do something that is totally contrary to the desires of your spouse, and what they think should be happening in the marriage relationship or in the family, even things that cross all the boundaries of what you think are the normal rules for marriage and relationships.

For example, Peter was the only disciple that we know for sure was married. Yet, he dropped everything and traveled with Jesus for 3-years. I am not talking 3-days, 3-weeks, or 3-months; he made the decision to leave his family for 3-years. We have no indication that His wife traveled with him. All we know is that Peter was one of the three, part of the inner circle of Jesus, and he went wherever Jesus went. I can guarantee you that if Peter’s wife was like any normal human being she had some serious issues with his decision. She would not have taken too kindly to Peter not earning a living and just following some man who claimed to be God. What about the vows, what about the contract, what about his duties?

Interestingly, we never read of Jesus even worrying about Peter’s family. He called Peter to follow and He expected him to follow. You might be thinking that Peter brought her along and the text just does not mention it. That may be, however, there is not a single story in the New Testament, or any cultural background that would lend support to the idea that Peter, or any of the other disciples, brought their family along. Culturally, when a Rabi chose his disciples, they left everything behind, and for a period of time dedicated all to becoming like their master, in all things.

Paul also lends support to this concept of prioritizing the will of God in your life, even above your marriage, and makes this point abundantly clear when he wrote to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 7:29-32

Now let me say this, dear brothers and sisters: The time that remains is very short, **so husbands should not let marriage be their major concern**. Happiness or sadness or wealth should not keep **anyone** from doing God’s work. Those in frequent contact with the things of the world should make good use of them without becoming attached to them, for this world and all it contains will pass away. In everything you do, I want you to be free from the concerns of this life.

Please don’t misunderstand, Paul is not anti-marriage, anti-family, or anti-wealth, he is merely making the point that nothing is to take a higher priority in your life than the Lord. By referencing that the time was short, Paul’s mind was clearly set on Christ and His soon return. Thus, even marriage, our most sacred, honored, and protected of relationships, must **always** be submitted to the work that God has assigned to the individual. Husbands, and by implication wives, should not let marriage be their major concern. The things of this world should not keep **anyone** from doing God’s work.

And if you think that God will **only** give you and your spouse assignments that are identical and in alignment with your mutual goals, then you do not understand the admonition that Paul gives and you have not been paying close attention to what we have discovered about God’s love. You cannot place God into a box—period! Not a marriage box, not a behavior box, not a cultural box, not a religious box, and most definitely not a love box. He does not fit and He will never fit any box that we create for Him, no matter how hard we try and shove Him in. He is God and is by definition so far above any box we create for Him.

To make this point abundantly clear, here is what a disciple can expect:

Matthew 10:34-39

Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! **No, I came to bring a sword.** I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Your enemies will be right in your own household! If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it.

"I came to bring a sword." I am sorry, but I cannot soften this statement. Jesus brings division; He brings a sword. He separates even the most intimate of human relationships. He draws a line between those who are His and those who are not; regardless of any human consequence. He separates those who listen to His voice and those who follow their own wisdom. And the unavoidable result is that if you are His disciple, there will be great conflict; right in your own household. This conflict may be with your mom, your dad, your brothers and sisters, your spouse, your in-laws, your grandparents, your children, your extended relatives, and even those whom you thought were your friends. **It will be unavoidable – Christ divides!**

In fact, there is a chance that this conflict and division may be so intense that you might even lose some of these relationships. I know this is extremely uncomfortable. I am sorry, but the only comfort I can give you is that you can rest in the fact that God is love; therefore, in one way or another, this is an expression of His love in our lives.

Personally, I have experienced this and from what some of you have told me, you are also starting to experience this and are beginning to get the push back from your families and friends as they expect you to behave in a way that they have been accustomed.

When I first gave my life to Jesus, my Dad was not happy about it at all. My sister was the first in my family to fall in love with the Lord, but about one year later, and in a matter of a few months, my Mom, my two brothers, and I all became Christians. My dad felt as if we had abandoned him and now loved God more than we did him. Our devotion to Jesus so emotionally and spiritually destabilized my father that it created massive conflict in our family. Without going into a lot of detail it was ugly, loud, and very painful.

I have even experienced the horror of living with an enemy right in my own household. I trusted my life, my reputation, and my kids to someone to whom I thought loved the Lord and would make choices in accordance with His desires; but I found that my trust was misplaced. This enemy quietly and surreptitiously sowed seeds of hate, rebellion, and discord that eventually led to great damage and destruction in the lives of my family.

This was very difficult for me and it took me a long time to reconcile this with the truth: anyone who desires to be a disciple of Jesus will face opposition, conflict, stress, tension, and downright persecution; and it will likely be experienced first within their own family. I should not have been surprised, but I was. I should have expected this, but unfortunately I did not take God at His word.

Now this next point I want to make very carefully. We have learned that there is not a whole lot of practical difference between a believer who lives predominately from their *Old Man* and an unbeliever. They are both given over to the **priority** and the **authority** of their flesh. Therefore, I believe that this statement of division and the sword also applies to those who call themselves Christians, but who are not truly disciples—those who have accepted Jesus as their Savior, but have not truly accepted Him as their Lord.

As a result, in the church, in the body of Christ, there is division; there is a bloody sword. Let me warn you, if you are going to be a disciple, if you are going to carry your cross, if you are going to be worthy of His name, if you are truly going to be a man or a woman of God, then you will be persecuted by those in the "Religion" of Christianity who simply do not take God at His word. It does not matter if someone is a Christian, it does not matter how religious they are, if they place a higher authority on their views and their perspective than they do the views of perspectives of God, you will likely become an enemy.

That is why we must count the cost of true discipleship. Unfortunately in Western Christianity, this is not really discussed very often. These passages I read tonight are usually either avoided entirely or read quickly and brushed over because they just do not fit comfortably in our God box. Western Christianity has adopted a very seeker flavored message that is all about grace and salvation; and while that is wonderful and dead on, it is not the entire gospel message.

We do people a great disservice by only teaching them part of the truth. In fact, this has been a significant factor as to why Christianity is in a steep decline in Western society. People are not taught what it means to be a disciple, or said another way, to let Jesus be the Lord of their lives. They do not know what it means to walk by faith in the Spirit of God letting the Word of God be their absolute **priority** and the ultimate **authority** for their lives.

We don't challenge people to count the cost. We don't provoke them to even think about what it means to give up one's life and to crucify the *Old Man* with its sinful nature. We don't tell them how jealous God will be of the Spirit that He puts inside of them or of His desire for **oneness**. We don't tell them that in order to experience God in any real way, they must walk by faith uniting the true knowledge of God with active belief.

Our unwillingness to deal in truth has really costs us. It is sad but few believers have actually experienced God in the power of absolute humble dependence upon Him. Few believers experience His peace, His rest, His abundance, and the burden that is light and easy. Few people love with the love of the Lord such that their lives are the very evidence of God living here on earth. It is terrible, but we have been at the center of our own demise. We must teach the truth, all of it, so that every person knows what it means to carry their cross and to be a disciple of Jesus.

He Gives Us A New Family

I want you to understand something about God; although, on one level, being a disciple sounds so horrible, He never asks us for anything that He does not fully intend on repaying to us in abundance. Remember, God wants us to be positioned with Him in a tight and intimate relationship so He can lavish His love on our lives (**Exodus 20:6** and **Deuteronomy 5:10**).

In this next passage, we find that Peter understood the cost of being a disciple, but he also wanted to know what was in it for him.

Mark 10:28-30

Then Peter began to mention all that he and the other disciples had left behind. "We've given up everything to follow you," he said.

And Jesus replied, "I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return, a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property — with persecutions. And in the world to come they will have eternal life."

This is awesome. Whatever we are asked to give up will be repaid to us a hundred times over not only in this life but in our life to come. First of all, our new family is gigundous! We have been united by the Spirit of God with every believer everywhere in the world. Not only that, in eternity we will be united with every believer that has ever lived or ever will live. They will all be our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Yes, the package deal comes with persecution, and we have talked about why persecution is necessary, but the package deal also comes with eternal life and great reward.

Ephesians 1:4-5

Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.

For those of us who have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we have been adopted in to the family of God. This is part of that great plan that He has had for our lives all along. He chose us, He made His plans, He purchased us with the blood of His son, He has given each of us our assignments, and now He brings all of that to fruition and unites us together with Him in one big family.

That is why when we love each other, when we hang out with each other, when we prefer each other, and truly enjoy each other, others are jealous. They want what we have. Make no mistake that is one of God's primary purposes for bringing us into His family. He wants our relationships to be the very light that attracts others to Him. He wants our love, shared in our family, to be the supernatural evidence that convinces others that Jesus lives (John 17:22-23).

1 Peter 2:9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Do you get the picture? Our family is unique and special. We belong to Him and we are the ambassadors of His love. We are His royal priesthood. This truth is to be the very foundation for our humble dependence upon God and why we are to listen first and foremost to His voice in our lives; we were not a people, but now we are the people of God.

Ephesians 2:19-22 also says that we have all been carefully joined together, assembled into a holy temple of the Lord as part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit. This word picture is powerful and meaningful! During Jesus' day, the temple of the Lord was marvelous and beautiful, and it was the very center of Jewish society and culture. That is what we are to be in our collective form—marvelous, beautiful, and astonishing. We are to be what attracts others to God; we are to be the reason they believe.

I told you, God always returns to us more than we could ever give up. We are His house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

As we close, I want you to see that this teaching, difficult as it may be, is entirely consistent with the greatest of all commandments.

Matthew 22:36-40

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And He said to him, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing is more important than knowing God and loving Him with your entire heart, soul, and mind. That means He is to always be your absolute **priority** and the ultimate **authority** in your life. In addition, we are to identify ourselves with and cling to our new family, those who similarly seek the will of God. This is His will. This is His restructuring. This is His doing, and collectively we are His masterpiece, His work of art, His temple of unspeakable beauty.

Let's pray.



Redefined Relationships - 3b

This is part b of The Faces of Love 3 – Redefined Relationships. Last week we focused on how when we become believers God wants us to redefine, reprioritize, and fundamentally change the nature of all our relationships. He requires this in two respects:

1. God wants us to prioritize His voice and His instruction in our lives over everything and everyone else. No one else, and nothing thing else, is to have priority; not our family relationships, our cultural responsibilities, duties, obligations, traditions, or religious customs.
2. He wants us to prioritize in our lives the relationships we have with those who do the will of the Father. In fact, we are to consider those who do the will of the Father as our fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. In other words, the people whom God has brought into your life, those who truly seek the Lord's will, are your new family; and, therefore, your new priority.

If you really believe the truth and choose to make these cataclysmic changes in your relationships, you are obviously headed for conflict at multiple levels. So we are going to try and understand what our responsibilities are to those in our lives. Tonight we will look at our responsibilities to those who do not seek the will of the Father, both believer's and unbelievers. Next week we will start to look at our responsibilities to our new family, those who seek the will of the Father.

Before we look at our responsibilities, I want to address our motivation. Yes, God asks us to make radical changes in our lives, in our perspectives, in our attitudes, and in our relationship choices, but it is important that we understand why. God does not require this because He wants us to be exclusive, separatists or because He is just itching to pick a fight and bring trouble into our lives. Remember, God is love and in this series we are talking about the many faces of His love; therefore, we must understand that this instruction begins, ends, and is enmeshed in His love for us and for others.

We may not understand it and we may not even conceive why God would ask us to take such seemingly harsh and drastic steps, but we are not to second guess God and substitute our own wisdom for His. Our own wisdom has never really served us that well; it has always led us to walk on the **wrong road**, the broad path that leads to destruction and pain. We are to trust that God is God and that He is love; and, therefore, His instruction regarding our relationships is what is best for both our lives and the lives of those we love.

The Father knows that unless we love Him more than we love anyone or anything in this life, there will always be idols that we have in our heart that stand between the Father and our fellowship with Him. There will always be something or someone with a greater priority and authority in our lives than Him. As a result, their voice will always be before us drowning out the voice of God in our lives. We will not be able to help but listen to their demands and their incessant cries for attention. Inevitably, all of this works against our ability to experience the ultimate in Christianity: Christ living in us and Christ living through us. (See John 14:8-14; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:5; and Colossians 1:27.)

Further, the Father knows that if we prioritize our relationships with unbelievers, or believers who are predominately given over to the flesh, that we will be unequally yoked, meaning that the bigger stronger cow will win control and set the direction for our lives. In other words, if we present ourselves to this world in any way, shape, or form, we will be conformed into its image. It will happen to us and before long when we look into the mirror we will not be able to identify the image of our Father, but we will look just like everyone else who is beholden to this world, its system, and its ways. (See Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 11:28-30; and 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.)

In contrast, we are to follow Christ's example in all things and we are to be manically focused on making God our absolute **priority** and the ultimate **authority** in our life. After all, Jesus never lived to do what He wanted to do; He only lived to do the will of the Father (John 6:38). Jesus said:

John 4:34

My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.

This work of the Father concerns the redemption of mankind and His effort of reconciling all things into His son Jesus (**Colossians 1:18-22**). This is the Father's desire; this is His will. Therefore, He wants us to live as His **New Creations**, living only to accomplish His work, so that we can carry on this redemptive effort on His behalf as He lives His life through us. We are to be His instruments, His vessels, His possession to proclaim His excellencies, and show others the goodness of God (**1 Peter 2:9**).

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

It is because of the very fact that we have been appointed by the creator of the universe to be ambassadors of His love, that we are to prioritize His voice above all things in our life, and we are to prioritize the relationships we have with those who do the will of the Father above all other relationships.

God requires this from us first of all for our own safety. He knows that we are never safer, more secure, and more protected than when He is our obsession; and doing His will becomes so vital to our existence that it is like the very food we eat. And secondly, He requires this of us because He desperately wants others to have an opportunity to be reconciled to Him; and this reconciliation comes through us as we are positioned in relationship with Him such that He is able to live His life in and through us.

Does this make sense? Do you now understand why His instruction to us, though it may sound harsh, cold, unloving, exclusive, and is inevitably disruptive to many, is in fact overwhelming loving.

Our Responsibility to Unbelievers and Believers Who Do Not Seek or Know the Will of God

As you can expect, those who on the other end of this reprioritizing of your relationships will not understand what you are doing and they will not be very happy about it. In fact, you can expect to receive anger and some very harsh reactions. These people in your life are going to feel as if you have rejected them, they will be hurt, confused, and even feel attacked; as a result, they will do what most people do when they feel vulnerable, they will attack you as a way to protect themselves. They will even try and pull out scripture to show you that you are being unloving, disobedient, disrespectful, rude, and even self-righteous.

It is very important that you expect this type of emotional and psychological reaction. If not, you are going to be caught off guard and be tempted to respond back in anger out of your own hurt.

The reality is that they just feel threatened in one way shape or form. What they thought they had in you, possessed in you, or could control in you, is gone. All their normal means of relating with you, hanging out with you, and even manipulating you, has been altered. This is understandable, you are not the same person; you are a **New Creation** in Christ, and God is now your sole authority.

And because you have a new nature, the very basis for your fellowship has also changed. Where it was once the priorities of this world and the pleasures that this world has to offer, it now is centered on the fact that you are an agent of reconciliation between them and God. Therefore, as part of redefining your relationships, it is important to learn how to relate to others on the basis of God's love and no longer only on the basis of what this world has to offer.

Personally, I have found it helpful, in the midst of personal attacks and emotional reactions, to communicate one simple truth: I must love the Lord with all my heart, mind, and soul, or I will never be able to truly love them with the love of God; a love that is free from need, want, control, and which is not enmeshed in personal interest (Matthew 22:36-40).

I encourage you to let them know that you are not rejecting them, you are not throwing them away, but you must first and foremost be given over to the one who truly loves you; for it is only then that you will be able to adequately share that love with them.

Now, keep in mind, you are not responsible for their response. They may absolutely decide that they don't want your message and they don't want to be reconciled to God (at least not yet); and in that case you are not to try and force it. You must let them go and, like God, you must honor their choice.

Let's look at a passage in Luke that captures this entire idea. This is the instruction Jesus gave His disciples right before He sent them out to go to all the towns and villages He planned to visit.

Luke 10:1-12

The Lord now chose seventy-two other disciples and sent them on ahead in pairs to all the towns and villages He planned to visit. These were his instructions to them: "The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. Pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest, and ask him to send out more workers for his fields.

Go now, and remember that I am sending you out as lambs among wolves. Don't take along any money, or a traveler's bag, or even an extra pair of sandals. And don't stop to greet anyone on the road. "Whenever you enter a home, give it your blessing. If those who live there are worthy, the blessing will stand; if they are not, the blessing will return to you. When you enter a town, don't move around from home to home. Stay in one place, eating and drinking what they provide you. Don't hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve their pay.

If a town welcomes you, eat whatever is set before you and heal the sick. As you heal them, say, 'The Kingdom of God is near you now.' But if a town refuses to welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'We wipe the dust of your town from our feet as a public announcement of your doom. And don't forget the Kingdom of God is near!' The truth is, even wicked Sodom will be better off than such a town on the judgment day.

This set of scriptures offer us so much understanding as to our relationships with those who do not seek to know the will of God. For some of you this may be very challenging because you have *not* approached relationships in the way that God has prescribed; rather, you have made yourself vulnerable and open to those who do not care to follow the will of God. Some of those people may still be in your life, and they are expecting you to do and behave exactly as you have always done. Therefore, if you truly care about them, if you love them, if you are concerned for their soul, then you must redefine and reprioritize these relationships in your heart. Trust your Father; this is the best way for these individuals to get to know the love of God. Based on Luke 10, we discover the following:

1. We are to understand that God has a plan. He sends us to people that He plans on visiting; people that He has chosen to hear the good news about Christ. He wants them to see His glory in and through our lives. Thus, the relationships that God brings us into with those who do not seek the will of God are intended to be extremely purposeful—they are not random. As I said previously, God wants others to experience Him; and we are His vehicle for communicating God's desire to be in relationship with those people.
2. We must remember that if we make ourselves vulnerable in these relationships we will either be wounded or we will die as wolves always kill the lambs. Lambs are not capable of either defending themselves or attacking. We must remember that we have been sent by God into the midst of danger. That is why it is so important that we approach these relationships as God instructs us so that we can be safe and protected. Thus, we are not to view these relationships as though they

belong to us with anything personally to gain or to lose.

To help you understand this concept, you must remember that a person who does not belong to the Father is an enemy of Christ. I am not saying that they are purposefully hateful and defiant to God, or that they even know they are an enemy of Christ; it is just a spiritual reality. Just like our sinful nature is always hostile to God and is not even able to obey God (**Romans 8:5-8**).

With this truth in mind, we are told that Jesus never fully trusted Himself to anyone, because He knew what they were really like. No one needed to tell Him about human nature (**John 2:24-25**). In the same way, we are not to ever trust ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable to those who do not seek the will of God. We are to know what they are really like at their core of their being and we are to keep a boundary of protection. This is wise and this is the way of Christ!

First, you are to discern whether or not an individual in your life is an appointment from God or merely a product of your own desire. If this person has not been appointed to you by the Father, you are not to invest yourself in their life. I know this sounds harsh, but it is for your protection and theirs. God knows who He wants to send into that person's life; and you are not to be in the way, at least not if you truly love them, care for them, and want what is best for their life.

Second, as you enter into a relationship, you are not to have anything emotionally, physically, or psychologically attaching you to them. You are to have healthy boundaries, the foundation of which is your knowledge that you have been sent to this person for a reason: to be God's instrument of reconciliation. Let me explain this in a different way. In the event they reject you and act like wolves act, you are to have no reason to feel the need to attack back because you have nothing to lose. You are merely a sheep whose life is protected by your Shepherd. You have nothing to fear and nothing to truly lose.

3. In instructing the disciples to not take along any money, a traveler's bag, or even an extra pair of sandals, we are to understand that we are to enter into these relationships not relying on our own capabilities, our own intellect, our own wisdom, or our own provision. We are to be in a position where we rely solely on the wisdom and the resources that come from God. He will be our provision and we will be without lack.
4. We are to only enter into relationships with those to whom God sends us. We are not to stop to greet anyone on the road. We are to be focused on the assignments that God gives us, and we are not to be free floaters seeking fulfillment, attachment, meaning, or value in the fact that we can get others to stop and pay attention to us. We are to move beyond ourselves, beyond self obsession, beyond our need and seek only to fulfill the will of God in our lives.
5. When you do enter into a relationship that God has sent you to, let the blessing of God fall on that relationship. Let God be at the center of all your interactions. If they are worthy, if they are open, if they are accepting of you in that capacity, then let your blessing remain on that relationship; continue in it as you discover how God desires to use you in that person's life. In that context, it is ok to be open to receive from them, to have a mutual and healthy exchange, and to allow a friendship to develop. It is ok to be in that next level of fellowship and accept the things that they have to offer to you in terms of relationship. However you must never forget that you are a lamb sent amongst wolves.
6. You are also not to be bouncing around from person to person (as Jesus says, from house to house) as if you are some convert hunter. This is about relationship; building and fostering an environment where the work of God can be done through you in the lives of others. Therefore, if God has sent you into a relationship, and if they accept you and accept your role in their life, then stay there and invest as long as God and that person allows.
7. If the person wants to be in relationship – you are to accept them for who they are and where they are at. I believe that is what Jesus means when He says “eat what is placed in front of you.” You cannot expect someone to be in a place that God has not taken them to; and you cannot pick or choose based on the personality type or the personal style that you like. You must work with the person that God sends to you regardless of your personal preferences. This person may not be “cool,” socially part of the in-crowd, or fit your look and feel. In fact they may be difficult and very hard to be with. But you are to be the instrument by which God brings healing to their sick soul.

You must remember this next point. When God sends you into relationships with those who do not seek His will, it is not about you; it is about them. Most of us have developed such horrible habits where we look to relationships to serve our needs and our emotional psyche. It seems we always seem to find a way to make everything about us in some way, shape or form. For the most part, a person has to add to us in some way and not detract from how or what we want others to think of us. Therefore, we pick and choose and as a result many people are left extremely lonely and unwanted.

That is not God's way. We are to eat what is placed in front of us and begin the process of ministering the healing love of Jesus in that persons' life; and make no mistake, we are to tell them that the kingdom of God is at hand; we are to let them know that God wants to have a relationship with them and wants to lavish His love in their life. We must always remember that we are God's ambassadors and that is to be the very foundation of our relationship—desiring to see that person reconciled to Christ.

8. Now, if they don't want to be in relationship with you on this basis, where Christ is the center, but they want you to be in relationship with them on their terms, and want you to do the things you used to do, go to the places you used to go, talk about the things you used to talk about, then you are to leave that relationship and move on.

In fact, you are to be very public about it; meaning that you are to be open and honest with them. You are not just to disappear from their lives and leave them wondering what happened to you. You are to communicate with them why you can't hang out and be in relationship with them any longer. You are to explain that the time is short and they are making a big mistake by not wanting God in their lives for judgment is coming and is certain. Then you are simply to move on. You have done your part and you are not responsible for their choice. Wipe the dust from your feet, have no regret, pursue them no further, don't look back, and do not long to be with them living a lifestyle which is void of the presence of God. You are to understand that they have made a choice, and you are to honor that choice.

I want to make a critical point here. You have to be very careful to stay focused on your assignment and you are not to be so close, so vulnerable, or so intimate that you are once again tempted to join them in their activities. Paul explains:

Ephesians 4:17-24

With the Lord's authority let me say this: Live no longer as the ungodly do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their closed minds are full of darkness; they are far away from the life of God because they have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They don't care anymore about right and wrong, and they have given themselves over to immoral ways. Their lives are filled with all kinds of impurity and greed. But that isn't what you were taught when you learned about Christ. Since you have heard all about him and have learned the truth that is in Jesus, throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life, which is rotten through and through, full of lust and deception. Instead, there must be a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness — righteous, holy, and true.

Many of you might be sitting there thinking that you have really blown it and that you have spent so much time pursuing relationships that God never intended you to pursue, and you have done it all wrong. Remember, there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1); this is a wonderful and powerful truth. Remember it; cling to it!

But also remember God does not desire you to continue this way. He desires you to follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:25)—every part! You must know that you have been traveling down the **wrong road**; and, therefore, you must simply stop. Get off the broad path that leads to destruction and pain in your life, and choose to follow God's prescription for relationships with those who do not seek or know the will of God.

You must also reject that notion to do something about the powerful feelings that will arise when you feel personally rejected in this process. Believe me, people will choose to walk away and not include you any longer in their lives, and it will hurt. Anytime you have developed attachments to people and those attachments are torn away, it causes deep pain. And knowing the truth about relationships does not really help make it feel any better; it still hurts.

But here is a very important word of caution about reacting to that hurt. Because in our *Old Sinful Nature* we have approached relationships in a very self-seeking manner, we don't want to be rejected by others—it is a matter of pride. We want to know that deep down inside they really want us, desire us, would love to be in relationship with us, and that what we had to offer them was something that they actually valued. We cannot stand the thought that we might be expendable to them, and that they just used us for pleasure and entertainment. The thought of that kills us and really hurts our ego and our self-image.

So often I have seen people who are trying to redefine and reprioritize their relationships run back and seek some level of validation from those people who were in their lives. This is a big mistake and it merely feeds the flesh, it feeds your insecurity, and it feeds the desire that you have to find your self-worth in yourself and not in the unbelievable reality that you are a child of God. This is dangerous; don't go there.

These feelings will sneak up on you, but now that we have talked about it, I want you to be aware of it and expect it so you can choose now how you are going to handle it. Understand, if you try and make a decision when you are in the midst of this kind of relationship disruption, I guarantee you that you will likely make a wrong choice. **You must make the choice now.** You must decide that you will prioritize God first and foremost in your life, even above yourself. In fact, this is the ultimate redefinition of relationship; setting aside your flesh, and following the Spirit's leading in all things.

Also, by way of perspective, understand that if you approach relationships in the manner prescribed by God, that when they reject you they are really rejecting God in you.

Luke 10:16

Then he said to the disciples, "Anyone who accepts your message is also accepting me. And anyone who rejects you is rejecting me. And anyone who rejects me is rejecting God who sent me."

Therefore, you are not to take it personal, but let that rejection flow through you to God and let Him deal with it. He can manage it much better than you or I can.

Luke 6:22-23

God blesses you who are hated and excluded and mocked and cursed because you are identified with me, the Son of Man. "When that happens, rejoice! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were also treated that way by your ancestors.

I always like to say that God's ways are always inside out and upside down from how we would normally react. He does not want us to grieve over the fact that we are rejected; in fact He wants us to rejoice—yes, rejoice. The reason is that when people reject us and walk away from a relationship, it means that we are finally doing it; we are living and fulfilling the will of God in our lives. This is wonderful, it is good news, and when we are rejected in this manner it is confirmation that Jesus is living His life in and through us.

Besides, we are not alone; many others have walked this path before us. We must keep perspective; and it is also good to know that there is a great reward that awaits us in heaven. Remember, last week I said that God never asks us to give up something without repaying us more than we could ever expect or even imagine. A great reward awaits us!

These truths should make a difference in how we view what God asks of us. It should help us understand more fully His love and how He wants that love expressed in and through our lives to others. It should help us understand why redefining and reprioritizing our relationships is not mean, cruel, an act of rebellion, disobedient or rude; rather, it is absolutely necessary and one of the most loving things we can do for those in our life.

Ephesians 5:1-2

Follow God's example in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love for others, following the example of Christ, who loved you and gave himself as a sacrifice to take away your sins. And God was pleased, because that sacrifice was like sweet perfume to him.

Let's follow Christ's example in all that we do and let us be that sweet perfume that rises before the Father and brings life and light to all the relationships that the Father has appointed for us.

Let's pray.



Redefined Relationships - 3c

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

What a fantastic story. Peter actually walked on water and experienced the supernatural. I believe this is the kind of life we are to live—one filled with experiences that literally defy logic, reason, sensibilities, the natural desires of our flesh, and the tangible realities of our world. We are to have the kind of experiences that leaves others starrng in amazement as we live the unfathomable.

As we continue our study on the Faces of God's Agape love, we are going to focus on the practical ways in which God desires our lives to be lived in the supernatural and how that reality is to invade our relationships with unbelievers. Over the last two weeks, we have discussed the fact that when we became believers God redefined all our relationships, especially those with unbelievers. As a result, He requires us to reprioritize all our relationships accordingly. Tonight we are going to dig a bit deeper to understand practically what that looks like in terms of our responsibilities to those in our life who do not know God.

Let me just say that faith is the key. Actively believing the truth is the door to the supernatural. If you are willing to get out of the boat, keep your eyes on Jesus, and if He is your sole focal point, you will often find yourself naturally doing the supernatural. You will find that your approach to life and relationships will lead you to do things that are contrary to your mind, your emotions, your desires, your needs, and to all that has been hard-wired into your DNA. You will find that your thoughts and perspectives are extremely unique and distinct from those in the world. And the decisions you make will not line up with what is practical, what is common sense, and with the normal way things are done in this world. Rather, your choices will reflect God's, mind, God's heart, God's methods, and they will be an expression of God's Agape love.

You will find that even in the midst of the storm, in the center of chaos, when the wind is contrary, and you are battered by the waves of circumstances, you will go where so few have even attempted to go. You will believe God, you will take Him at His word, and you will take action accordingly. Your choices will align up perfectly with what He tells you to do, no matter how crazy and impossible that instruction may seem.

Let's begin in Romans 12 and look at how this supernatural way of living will impact your relationships with unbelievers.

Romans 12:14-21

If people persecute you because you are a Christian, don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. Live in harmony with each other. Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you

are honorable. Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.

Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written, "I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it," says the Lord. Instead, do what the Scriptures say: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink, and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you." Don't let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.

When people come against you, instead of the normal reaction of being defensive, protecting yourself, and attacking back, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you are able to pray that God will bless those who persecute you. Then as a result of those prayers, you will find that God will place you in situations where you can be that blessing. Keep in mind, most people who are hostile to your way of life and your beliefs are extremely insecure and needy people. They will often use power, authority, and intimidation as a way to protect their weakness and their own struggle with inadequacy. Yet, you can actually provide for them in their need. Their souls are starving and are dying of thirst. They need the living manna and fountain of living water that can only come from Jesus.

Therefore, you can choose to build them up, encourage them, and find unique ways to love them despite the fact that they have been mean to you. In so doing, you will make a mark and a serious indentation on their conscience. Somewhere deep inside, they will be ashamed of the ways in which they have treated you. They may not show it, but it will be there. In honoring God in this way, in trusting yourself to Him, in refusing to pay back evil for evil, you will be living the supernatural life.

In addition, when you step outside of the pain and the circumstances in your own life and truly be happy for someone when the sun is shining down on their life, you are living a supernatural life that is not rooted in selfishness but in love. When your life is in order, things seem to be going ok, you don't have a lot of serious worries; yet, you are able to come along side someone who is suffering and share in their pain and walk with them through their difficulties, no matter how long it takes, you are living the supernatural life.

When you set aside your own rights, your own demands, and your own selfish desires, in order to live in harmony with the people in your life (whether at work, school or at home), when you refuse to consider yourself better than those who are just not as cool as you, and you purposefully engage in conversation and take an interest in the regular people in your life, and when you approach those relationships with humility and not a condescending know it all attitude that shows that you still think you are better than they are, then you are living a supernatural life that will be apparent to all.

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. That is the plan I follow, too. I try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what I like or what is best for me, but what is best for them so they may be saved.

The Spirit desires you to be sensitive to those around you and the community in which you find yourself, so as not to cause someone else to stumble. This however takes wisdom—the supernatural wisdom that comes only from God. Unfortunately, this verse has been used to strap people with so many unnecessary burdens when it comes to dealing with religious people who have serious problems with legalism.

Let me assure you, Paul is not talking about compromising the truth and supporting their legalistic hang-ups. For example, one time when Paul was hanging out with Peter and Peter started to separate himself from the Gentiles so as not to cause his Jewish brothers a problem, Paul publicly rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy and his compromise of the truth. You can find this story in Galatians 2:11-16.

I believe Paul is laying out a general principle of living in the Spirit of God: you are to always be others focused and are to stop worrying so much about yourself, your fun, your rights, and your pleasure. Rather, you are to consider how the exercise of your freedom will impact those to whom God has sent you. And all your choices are to be based on what is best for them.

In that regard, God's instruction to you regarding the need to reprioritize the relationships in your life

is really for the benefit of others, so that they may be saved. It may not seem so at first. You may reason with yourself and convince yourself that there is no real harm in being close, intimate, and vulnerable to those in the world. You think you can handle it and everything will be ok as long as you are not doing anything "too bad." Well that kind of thinking is foolishness and not entirely genuine. If you were to dig deep and be honest, you really just want your fun and you want to enjoy the pleasures of this world that these relationships afford you, and you do not want God messing that up.

But God asks you to set up these boundaries and to not be intimate with unbelievers because He knows that most of the time those relationships will lead you to compromise, resulting not only in harm to you but to the lives of those who don't know God. Your compromised life may become a barrier to their ever seeing the reality of the supernatural and to their ever believing that God loves them.

But if you are willing to follow God's prescription for relationships, if you are willing to jump out of the boat, if you are willing to only invest in those to whom God has assigned to you, if you are willing to trust that those people with whom you have been beholden to are not your responsibility but Gods, then you will find yourself walking on water. Sure, living this way will be scary and the waves will be crashing around you, and people will not be pleased. But if you keep your eyes on Jesus, reject your own wisdom, are honest with yourself and refuse to make rationalizations, and if you align your choices with the Word of God, you will do what few others have ever been able to do. It will be a wonder and you will see God's power as He moves through you and through the lives of those to whom He has given you.

This week as I have been mulling over this teaching, I keep thinking how sad it is that so many within Christianity have never experienced the power of God in this way. For the most part, we have refused to take God at His word and actively believe the truth. We can study it, we can discuss it, but living it is something altogether different. I also am amazed at how patient God has been with Christians who just live empty, self-centered, weak and impotent lives. It is horrible and I know that it grieves the Spirit of God. God want us to display His nature at all times—a nature that is supernaturally empowered where we are able to participate in the will of God in heaven being done here on earth.

Titus 3:1-7

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

When you become so aware of how undeserving you are of God's mercy, when you truly come to grips with your spiritual depravity, when you begin to realize how deep the darkness within your *Old Man* runs, and when you understand that despite your worthless condition, God still chose to lavish His love upon you, and, therefore, you choose to show love and mercy to others who are equally undeserving, you are living the supernatural life.

When you willfully submit to your bosses, your teachers, your parents, as you would submit to the Lord (as long as that submission is not in contravention to how God is leading you), then you will be living a life that others will simply not understand.

It takes a work of the Holy Spirit to set aside your pride, especially when you have been wronged, misjudged, mistreated, or taken advantage of by an authority. It takes a work of the Holy Spirit to not just instantly get mad, draw your battle lines, and show them that you are not going to let them take advantage of you. It takes a work of the Holy Spirit to instead choose to be peaceable, gentle, and submissive, remembering that you also once were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending your life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

Peaceable and gentle obedience truly honors God. In ***Hebrews 5:8*** we are told that even though Jesus

was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest. Similarly, when we follow Jesus' example, we are being qualified to be part of His royal priesthood, His ambassadors of love.

A couple of weeks ago we told a story from Jesus' childhood. His family came to Jerusalem for a celebration, but when it was time to leave Jesus stayed behind and did not tell His parents. A full day into the journey home His parents freaked. They thought Jesus was amongst their big group of relatives, but He was nowhere to be found. They searched for Him for 3-days and finally found Him talking with the teachers in the Temple. His mom was very upset but Jesus just told her that she should have known that He would have been in His Father's house.

And although from His parents' perspective Jesus behavior was absolutely inappropriate for a 12-year old boy, Jesus always first prioritized the appointments of His heavenly Father. However, I want to make a very important point; once that specific assignment was completed, Jesus once again willingly submitted to the leadership of His parents. Let's pick up with the final part of that passage in Luke.

Luke 2:49-51

"But why did you need to search?" he asked. "You should have known that I would be in my Father's house." But they didn't understand what he meant. Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them; and his mother stored all these things in her heart.

Therefore, absent God's specific instruction to the contrary, it is right for you to be subject to the authorities in your life. This is not to be done with an attitude as if you are being forced; rather, you are to serve in such a way that it is clear that you are showing consideration for all men.

Matthew 9:10-13

That night Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. The Pharisees were indignant. "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" they asked his disciples. When he heard this, Jesus replied, "Healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.' For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough."

Yes, Jesus hung out with unbelievers. He hung out with the worse of the worse. He enjoyed their company, He enjoyed their meals, and He even enjoyed their wines. In fact, in Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34, Jesus is accused of being a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of the worst sort of sinners. But notice, Jesus relationship with them was not built around their darkness; rather, it was built around His light.

First of all, we know that Jesus only did what His Father told Him to do (John 5:19,20; 17:4), therefore, every time He developed a relationship with someone it was because He was lead by the Spirit of God. Secondly, He entered into relationship with unbelievers with the purpose of healing their spiritual sickness, not because He was attracted to the pleasures of this world. Jesus was busy pouring the mercy of God on those who had never received mercy from the religious community.

Similarly, our relationships with unbelievers are to be based on the assignments that God has given us. We are to engage others with the purpose of drawing them into our light, versus being attracted to their darkness. We are to be legitimately concerned about their spiritual sickness, and we are to be God's instrument of healing.

Therefore, we should want nothing that we do to become a barrier to their knowing the life that can be found in Jesus. Let me ask you, how often are your relationships with unbelievers not about the light or not about their spiritual sickness but about such things such as music, money, careers, boys, girls, drinking, drugs, a certain life-style, etc? This is wrong! This is not the supernatural life to which you are entitled; it is merely your seeking to meet the needs of your flesh.

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Wow, loving those who are mean, cruel, and who have purposefully hurt you is a big call. Let me tell you, apart from a supernatural transformation of the very substance of your heart, this is an impossible command to fulfill. It takes perfection to love with this kind of love. It takes a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. That is why in Ephesians 4:23-24 you are told that you must be willing to display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness—righteous, holy, and true. A person who lives from their **New Creation** will know how to love, even their enemies, with the supernatural love of the Lord. This is how you will be different from everyone else; this is the impossible, something they cannot do.

We are to live a life on the edge. A life that leaves others in total confusion and amazement as they try and understand what in the world makes us tick. This is how we jump out of the boat, walk on the waves and experience the supernatural.

Sadly, if you choose to live this way, most others will do little more than watch you as you participate in the unfathomable. Those who walk the narrow path, those who make God their absolute **priority** and the ultimate **authority** of their life, and those who listen to the voice of God and follow only His voice, are few and far between. Even the closest followers of Jesus just stayed in the boat and watched. No one even wanted to give it a try; they wanted to stay safely tucked into the tangible which to them felt so secure, so familiar, and so real.

I can understand their being afraid to jump out of the boat, they must have thought Peter was crazy and out of his mind. **Those who watch can never really understand the decisions you must make, for they have little experience with the ways in which the Spirit moves.** To them it's all so confusing and way too risky. But you live this way because you have to; the Spirit compels you. You have no choice. Jesus is your life and doing what He says, going where He wants you to go, and doing His will has become the very food for your existence. You simply want nothing to stand in the way of your **oneness** with Him.

Now, honestly, I am still a little amazed that once the other disciples saw Peter actually walk on water that they did not line up at the edge of the boat to give it a try. After all, that was so totally cool and it was not really that risky. Even when Peter fell, Jesus was there to pick him up. I always thought that at least John would have jumped in even if it was just out of competition and not wanting Peter to get the best of him. But even John felt safe and comfortable right where he was at watching while Peter experienced the supernatural.

It is sad but that seems to be the way it still is. Most everyone likes to stay in their little safe box of reality attached to demands of their flesh; and, as a result, rarely, if ever, get to experience the power of Jesus that causes us to live outside of anything anyone would consider to be normal.

Are you a watcher or are you one who is willing to jump out of the boat? This is not meant to be just a cute little question to make sure you are challenged by this teaching. This is a question that is at the center of how God wants you to live.

God wants you to prioritize His voice and His instruction in your life over everything and everyone else. No one else, and nothing thing else, is to have priority. That includes your family relationships, your friendships, your loved ones, your social circles, your cultural responsibilities, and so on. Nothing is to supersede the authority of God's voice in your life. Everything is to flow from Him. What others experience of you in relationship should be the overflow from what you have been experiencing with God. They are to drink of your excess.

Over the last couple of weeks, I have talked with many of you about applying these truths. In each and every one of those discussions, the choices that were before you stood in total opposition to everything deep inside your being. I am not just talking about the obvious behavior issues regarding fellowship with

unbelievers, but I am talking about the motivations in your heart for being in and pursuing those relationships in the first place.

If each of us were honest, I believe we would find that at the center of every one of those relationships is a place where we operate out of need, insecurity, desire, and a belief that God is not really going to be who He says He will be for us. A belief that God may work for some people, but we are not quite sure that He is going to work for us; at least not in the way we want Him to, when we want Him to.

It is this combination of wrong belief and unbelief that keeps you from redefining and reprioritizing your relationships in accord with the will of God. But if you want to experience the supernatural, you must be honest with yourself and come clean with all the unbelief and wrong belief that is at the center of your heart. I know that this is hard and taking a close look in the mirror reveals blemishes that you never wanted to know were there. But it is absolutely necessary to shatter the illusion that staying in the boat is the safe thing to do.

Let's get back to Peter walking on water. When he took his eyes off of Jesus and started to look at what was happening all around him, when he tried to fathom the unfathomable, make sense out of the impossible, he began to sink and sink fast. It seems somewhat silly that Peter would have all of a sudden become so insecure and so freaked out, after all he was walking on water. You think he might have done a few cartwheels, back-tucks and done a little showing off in front of the other disciples.

But regardless of the miraculous, it did not take much for Peter to lose his focus and sink. One moment he was up: emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and then the next he was all wet. All it took was a few seconds of distraction, a few seconds of looking at the tangible, a few seconds of doubt, and he went down.

This is the way it often happens. You start down this path of experiencing God and hearing His voice in your life, and it is all so exciting. Especially the first few times you know that you know that you know that God has spoken to you. It is such a high. But when what He asks you to do is outside of the realm of possibility for your mind, your emotions, and when it impacts the relationships in your life that have been so important to you, things become a bit uncertain. Fear starts to grow, worry, doubt, and even confusion.

Yes, you heard His voice, but when you consider what He requires of you, it really makes no practical sense so you want to instantly go back to what is tangible, what is comfortable, and what you can reason through with your own mind. Instantly you start to sink.

Maybe you have taken a step to separate yourself from some of the relationships to which you have been beholden in the past; relationships that did not honor God. But the reaction you received was cold and a bit harsh. This hurt your feelings and although we have talked about the fact that your decision will not be well received, you still were hurt. And instead of taking that hurt to God and letting Him fill that area of need, you went back to that person and tried to find a way for that hurt to be cared for; and you began to sink.

Maybe you found yourself in class or in a new job and instead of standing secure and confident in who you are as a child of God, and having others attracted to you because of His light in your life, you started to react out of insecurity and the desire to be accepted, liked, and to be considered interesting and funny. As a result, you found yourself slipping into their darkness, and you began to sink.

If this is where you are, remember that although Peter was sinking, he cried "Lord save me" and Jesus immediately stretched out His hand and pulled Peter out of the water. Remember our teaching on the narrow path.

Psalms 37:23-24

The steps of the godly are directed by the LORD. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will not fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand.

This Psalm was Peter's literal experience. This will be yours as well. Our God is so merciful and compassionate that even if we fail, even if we have blown it, He will be right there to put us back in the boat when we cry for Him to save us. This reality should bring us great comfort and give us confidence to go ahead and jump out of the boat without hesitation. All our fear, all our insecurity, all our "need" is just illusory and unfounded. It just keeps us from walking on the water and experiencing a life that is radical.

Personally, I want to live a life believing all that God has said. I want to naturally experience the supernatural as part of my day-in and day-out existence. Yes, in my flesh it is scary, to my reason it is insanity, to my emotions it is foolishness and way too risky, but it is how I want to live. I want to keep my eyes on Jesus Christ.

Further, I don't want to live by constantly sinking and having to rely on His wonderful mercy. Don't get me wrong, I am so thankful it is there and I have needed it often. But I want to learn to ignore all that is happening around me and focus on what Jesus has instructed me to do. I don't want to turn my eyes toward my pain, my sorrow, my trouble, and my fear. I want to keep my eyes on Him and not depart. I want to live a life that leaves others shaking their head in unbelief. I do not want to stay in the boat. I know this is easier said than done. Even as the words come out of my mouth my flesh is having a visceral reaction.

What about you? What do you want? Remember, if you are content only experiencing pieces of God He will let you. But you will be with those who spend most of their time watching as others walk on water. But if you want all of Him, if you want to live the supernatural, if you want to share in His divine nature, strap on your seat belt, it will be a very rough ride, but I assure you that you will experience God like so few others have ever experienced Him.

But you have to take God at His Word. You have to actively believe all that is true. You have to jump out of the boat and live by faith, walk by faith, and keep your eyes on Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.



Redefined Relationships - 3d

Over the last few weeks we have studied the reality that when we gave our hearts to Jesus Christ He redefined all our relationships with both believers and unbelievers. As a result, He asks us to reprioritize these relationships according to the priority He has established. I believe we have detailed quite exhaustively how we are to be in relationships with unbelievers; thus, tonight we are eventually going to switch and talk about our relationships with **believers**.

However, before I go there, I want to take a moment to take a temperature check, a self assessment of how we actually are living based on what we have studied so far.

I have a question for you. What happens if you run low on oil in your engine? Serious damage can occur, which is why most vehicles have some sort of indicator light or gauge to tell you if you are heading for inevitable disaster. Quite simply an engine needs oil to run and without it you can expect a melt-down. Usually, when the light comes on or the gauge meter is on the low side, you still have some time to take care of the situation. But if you wait and push it too far, just hoping that the problem will take care of itself, your journey will come to a sudden and quite costly end.

In the same way, God has given us indicators or gauges that we can look to as a way to know if we are heading for inevitable disaster or if we are safe and can travel this life without fear. Therefore, before we move on in this study and talk about our relationships with believers, I want us to stop and have each of us take a look at our own personal gauge. I want us to take a real look within.

I understand that most of us tend not to want to look within because we usually don't like what we see; and we don't want to go through the work and effort to fix the issues. That is why most people tend to avoid any true self-assessment unless some issue is thrown in our face by someone in our life; and even then we usually just react with anger, defensiveness and push that person away. But if you are not willing to take an honest look within, you just might be on the edge of personal disaster with extremely costly consequences not only to you but to others in your life.

As believers, it is also critical that we are not the kind of people who live in self-deception or denial. Although you may not be experiencing any serious problems right at this moment, if your engine is low on oil the damage is inevitable, it is just a matter of time. Please don't be so prideful to think that just because you are not doing anything "bad" that you're ok. Life is not about good or bad, it is not about a checklist of holy behaviors, it is all about faith.

Is Jesus living His life in and through you? Would others say so? Does your attitude and does the fruit of your life abundantly express the character and nature of God? Are your day-in-and-day-out choices in alignment with the Word of God? Are you truly living a changed life? Remember Galatians 6:15

Galatians 6:15-16

...What counts is whether we really have been changed into new and different people. May God's mercy and peace be upon all those who live by this principle. They are the new people of God.

I know for a fact that last year many of you had a very difficult time in terms of your walk with God and with the power, influence, and control that the world, and those in the world, had over your life. Many of you made some serious mistakes that if given the opportunity you would absolutely undo the choices that you made.

I also know that you did not just wake up one day and decide that you were going to make yourself vulnerable to the world and those in the world; rather, it was a progression of choices that led you to a point where your engine was without oil and you crashed. This is notwithstanding the fact that the entire time the oil light was flashing on and off and warning you, but you ignored it. In fact, over time you really did not even notice it anymore; you just became used to it.

I don't want this year to be a repeat of last year. I don't want any of you to experience that ever again.

I don't want to see you push away wisdom, push away God, and blindly run towards the inevitable melt-down; especially when it is so avoidable. That is why I believe God has led me to teach on our redefined and reprioritized relationships.

Relationships are potentially one of the most powerful and controlling influences in our life; especially if we have given over our emotions and our physical bodies to someone else. Thus, I am telling you, if you do not get this right, if you do not follow God's instructions on relationships, you will be hurt and the damage will potentially be paralyzing and can take a long time to heal.

Proverbs 8:36

But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death.

It is so important to understand God's heart of love in all of this. Quite simply, you do not hurt God when you sin and when you ignore His instructions for your life; you hurt yourself! But God loves you so much that He does not want you to experience any more self-inflicted wounds. That is why tonight we are going to check our gauges and see if the light is flashing red and if we are headed for danger. Tonight, I am going to give you an opportunity to stop and turn and go the other way.

The gauges we are going to look at tonight are essentially the fruit that is produced from our lives. We are going to look at various aspects of a Spirit filled life based on our redefined relationships and responsibilities with unbelievers and ask ourselves if it is clear, by our choices, our attitudes, and our behavior, that we are living as new and different people? You should be able to recognize that these gauges come from the last few weeks teachings.

Personal Gauges of Life

1. Are you living as an ambassador of God? Do you enter into relationships desiring others to be saved and thus bring the light of His love into all your relationships with unbelievers? Are you the instrument through which God's healing is brought into their lives that are sick and corrupt with sin?
2. Do you know who you are supposed to be investing in? Do you know the people that have been assigned to you by God?
3. Are you willing to eat what is set before you? Are you willing to build relationships with those assignments regardless of how cute, cool, awesome, and wonderful they may or may not be?
4. Are you willing to be in relationship and invest in your assignments regardless of their inherent personal limitations, flaws, or annoyances?
5. Are you remembering that you are a lamb sent out into the midst of wolves and therefore do you enter into relationships fully cloaked in the armor of God only doing what your Father tells you to do, only saying what He tells you to say, and only going where He tells you to go?
6. Are you drawing people into your light or are you being led slowly into their darkness? If you get a call or a text from an unbelieving friend to hang out, are you bringing them to hang out with your family (those of us who seek the will of God), or are you going into the midst of their environment, their circles, their relationships, and their darkness?
7. Are you emotionally, physically, psychologically, or spiritually attached to someone who does not love Jesus?
8. Do you find yourself rationalizing the whole thing and ignoring the flashing of the gauge? Have you come up with reasons and explanations why it is ok for you to be in an intimate relationship with unbelievers and have you told yourself that it is ok as long as you are not doing anything "bad"?
9. Are you peaceable, gentle, and merciful with those who wrong you and hurt you? Do you find yourself attacking back when you have been attacked, cutting down when you have been cut, judging someone just because in the past they may have mistreated you, bad-mouthing someone when you feel they have not been fair with you, or punishing the person emotionally and relationally when they have blown it?

10. Do you find yourself praying for blessing on those who have hurt you? Do you ask God for the opportunity to be that blessing and to bring His word into their starving soul and His living water into their parched tongues?
11. Can you legitimately rejoice with someone who has a real reason for rejoicing regardless of what is happening in your life?
12. Can you push aside your routine, your comfort, and your nice little bubble of self and sit with someone whose life is filled with sorrow and difficulty? If God has given you an assignment are you able to stick it out with them through thick and thin, or until God changes His instructions to you?
13. Do you find yourself shunning people who are just not cool enough for you or are you able to enjoy the company of ordinary people?
14. Do you do all things in a way that others can see that you are honorable, you have integrity, and that you show consideration for all men?
15. Do you naturally have a spirit of submissiveness to the authorities in your life or do you tend to fight over most everything and make it a burden for those people to carry out their God given responsibility over you?
16. Do you desire that the unbelievers in your life get saved and therefore you are unwilling to do anything—I mean anything—that might hinder that process?
17. Are you seeking the Lord's will in all your relationships or are you just living life and letting things fall where they fall?

I am sure that each of us has some serious problems answering these questions in the way we would ideally want to answer them. But I don't want you to misunderstand why we went through this list. This is not intended to be your personal checklist of good versus bad behavior that you should now focus on and go and do it better this next time. That would be a big mistake because you would only fail.

Remember, this is not about good or bad, it is not about trying, it is not about complying, it is only about faith: walking in the Spirit of God such that His life is lived in and through yours. **The gauges are there so that you do not live in self-deception and denial.** Reflecting on your attitudes, your choices, and your behaviors is merely for the purpose of helping you step back and look at the big picture and come to grips with what is predominantly produced from your life. It is for the purpose of helping you live in reality and not in religious denial.

Remember, walking in the Spirit of God is a moment by moment decision; thus, I am confident that every one of us has moments when we have failed big time and could never say that we have "meet the standard." But I don't want you to focus on the moments when you have reacted out of the flesh. Those moments do not define you or the status of your walk with God. Rather, I want you to think about the overall picture of your life and what is the dominant reality that others experience from you.

If you can honestly say that what flows from your life, as evident by your attitudes, choices and behaviors, is in alignment with the Spirit and yields love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness, then praise God, keep moving towards Him and keep growing in Him. Others will be experiencing the supernatural in and through you and that is a powerful thing.

If, however, you can honestly look at yourself and conclude that perhaps the dominant outpouring of your attitudes, choices and behaviors is not in alignment with God, then praise the Lord, it means that for a moment in time you have stopped and looked at the flashing red light. This is a good thing. This is not an issue of guilt, this is not an issue of blame, and this is not an issue of acceptability to God.

It simply means that although you are heading toward inevitable damage, you can stop right now and let the oil of the Spirit of God flow over your life. You can actually **confess** your sin (agree with God that for the most part you have not given Him room to rule and to reign in your heart) and then start the process of **repentance**: believing the truth and aligning your choices up with the Word of God. In **confession** and **repentance** you will find that Spirit will start to dominate your thoughts, your attitudes, your choices and He will naturally produce behaviors that bring glory to the Father—you will naturally live the supernatural life.

The great thing about living the Spirit filled life is that it is so overwhelmingly evident to everyone. Sure we might be able to force a couple of these outcomes by our own strength, but we cannot keep up the

effort for very long. We also cannot force a preponderance of these results. They are supernatural and can only be generated and sustained by a person who is living under the influence and direction of the Spirit of God. I want you to understand that if you are living by faith and walking in the Spirit of God, these attitudes, characteristics and behaviors will naturally flow from your life. You won't have to strive to make it happen.

I know that sometimes this whole idea of walking in the Spirit of God seems so overwhelming and impossible, but it is not. I want you to understand that it is the natural state of existence of the **New Creation**. You do not have to muster up the strength and determination to get it done. If you choose to agree with God's prescription for relationships, if you are willing to believe that what He has said is what is best for you, He will fully enable you to live it. He will provide all you need if only you will let Him.

Philippians 2:13

For God is working in you, **giving you** the **desire** to obey him and the **power** to do what pleases him.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

It is not that we think we can do anything of lasting value by ourselves. **Our only power and success comes from God**. He is the one who has enabled us to represent his new covenant. This is a covenant, not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old way ends in death; in the new way, the Holy Spirit gives life.

When you believe that God's ways are the right ways and that following Him will lead you to life and peace, then it is not that big of a deal to align your choices with His Word. It makes perfect sense; besides, the Spirit within you is yearning to be united with the Father in all things. You just have to set aside your pride, become deaf to the voice of your flesh, and **tune** your ears to the Spirit.

Galatians 5:25

If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

All aspects of your life, including all your relationships, are to be submitted to the influence and direction of the Spirit of God. Then He will lead you down the right paths and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect His will really is (***Psalm 25:10, Romans 12:2***).

Amos 3:3

Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?

This scripture actually provides a great transition point in this teaching. Can you walk with God if He is going one way and you are going a different direction? The obvious answer is no. That is why you must follow the Spirit's leading in all things; it is the only way to be where He is, which, by the way, is the safest place you can ever be.

So I am challenging you to agree with the way in which God has redefined your relationships. I am challenging you to align your thoughts and your choices with God's Word. I am challenging you to daily check your gauges as a way of living in reality and being honest with yourself. I am challenging you to do it God's way; and I promise that you will find life and peace.

Besides, you cannot walk with unbelievers unless you are going the same direction that they are going. This means that there is no safe middle ground, you are either walking with them towards their darkness or they are walking with you toward the light. One or the other is happening. Again, don't be fooled and live in some form of denial just because your pace may be slow; it's the destination that is the problem. Stop, turn around and walk toward the light. If they want to come, then fine, but if not you must, you must, walk

away—you must separate! You must leave them to God and to their choices.

You are a **child** of God, you have been **chosen** by Him to be His own, you are part of His royal priesthood, you are His own possession; therefore, you are to find your life, your friendship, your companionship, your intimacy with your brothers and sisters in the Lord. You are to be identified with your new family: those who do the will of their Father in heaven. This is the direction you are to walk and you are to stay together.

2 Timothy 2:22

Now flee from youthful lusts and **pursue** righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Paul's instruction to Timothy is exactly the same as I am instructing you now. Your friendship, your companionship, your intimacy is not to be with unbelievers, or with those who call themselves Christians but are walking down the path toward the darkness. You are to align yourself and invest yourself in those who pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace and those who call on the Lord from a pure heart and seek His will.

These attributes are to be what fundamentally defines all of your core relationships. Think of how you have made your relationship choices in the past. You look at someone and determine if they are a good fit for you based on such things as how cool, beautiful, funny, smart, daring, and sensitive you think they are, and so on. Everyone has their own list of requirements. But most of that is so skin deep, so fragile, and changes so fast that rarely is the person you are attracted to anything like what you had hoped.

But you have a **perfect** reason to be in intimate fellowship with other believers. You share the same Spirit; you are truly kin and at the center of your being you both are in love with the same person, Jesus. Besides, the Spirit is drawing you into **oneness** with each other so it is natural for the **New Creation** to want this kind of intimacy with your brothers and sisters in the Lord. As John 17 tells us, this is the very heart of God; please yield to it.

I have had many discussions about our relationships with each other in this church and I have tried, for example, to encourage you to reach out to each other to ensure that no one gets left behind and no one is left alone tempted to find their relational fulfillment with those in the world. And I have gotten such responses as:

- You have to understand you can't force relationships, we have nothing in common.
- You don't know them, they were mean to me in the past and I am not comfortable with them.
- I am sure they have people to be with; besides I am comfortable with my group and someone new will break the flow.
- I don't have time to think about it, I have so much to do. If they want to come along they can call me.
- I don't really like them, they annoy me.

No one has room to look down on anyone here. We have all said or at least thought these things from time to time. With that said, this kind of thinking is selfish, fleshly and I think with full confidence I can say that it is definitely not an expression of God's Agape love.

The Spirit desires our **oneness** in purpose and fellowship and He provides the basis for our connection, not the things of this world, not the mistakes we have made, not who we used to be. **He is our connection and He is to be the basis for all our fellowship.** We must set aside our own personal preferences, prejudices and bias. How can we honestly push away or choose to ignore someone who is pursuing righteousness, faith, love, and peace and who calls on the Lord with a pure heart. It makes no sense. We do it to our own peril.

I want you to understand how serious this instruction is. The word **pursue** is an extremely intense word. Some of the ways this word is used in the Greek is as follows:

- To run, to flee.
- To run swiftly in order to catch some person or thing.
- To run after someone or to follow without the idea of hostility or hindrance.
- To eagerly seek after someone.
- To earnestly endeavor to acquire.

Clearly, this word **pursue** is not a passive word; the verb is in the present active imperative tense. This means it is a command from the Lord; therefore, it is not optional; it is imperative to your life and it is a matter of obedience to the Father. It is also present and active, meaning that this is to be your ongoing day-in-and-day-out existence.

I wish there was a way for me to definitively convince you how critical this is to your having success in your walk with God. I beg you to believe the truth and make your relationship choices accordingly; it will save you so much trouble.

I encourage you to stop fighting against the wisdom of God, stop fighting against His will. Yield to it willingly, knowing that He loves you so much that every piece of instruction He gives you is for your benefit and not for your harm.

I also want you to understand how relationally rich you are in God here in this little fellowship. Sure, I know that not everyone is pursuing righteousness, faith, love, and peace and not everyone is calling on the Lord with a pure heart, but God has been so kind to give us many in our little group who truly and genuinely love Jesus and want nothing more than to be right with Him and to have all of Him. That is why I say you are rich. You may not really comprehend it, but you are wealthy in the Lord. You have access to the power and presence of the Spirit of God in the lives of the people here. There are many here who have jumped out of the boat and are walking on water in various areas of their life and you should want to drink of the overflow that comes from their walk with God.

Besides, you don't have to be the ice-breaker taking all the risk and being the first to jump out of the boat; others have already heroically broken through that barrier and jumped. You can merely join the company of those who want God to be the absolute **priority** and ultimate **authority** for their lives. You can plug in and follow in their footsteps (**Hebrews 6:12**) and the honesty, the vulnerability, the depth of intimacy, the security, and the personal fulfillment in these relationships will be unlike anything you have ever experienced. They will be based on the love of God and that love is perfect.

But it will not happen for you; you must choose to pursue it, to follow, to eagerly go after it, and to desire to be in this kind of fellowship. If you do, you will find life and peace, because you will be experiencing Jesus as He lives in and through the lives of those with whom you are in relationship.

Let's pray.

Next week we are going to start to explore the responsibilities we have to each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Remember, since our relationships have been redefined by the Lord, so have our responsibilities to each other. They are all based on the new priorities that God has established for our life.



Redefined Relationships - 3e

Before we get to part 3e of Redefined Relationships, I would like to take a moment to talk to you about practically applying the truth that you have been taught. I have had quite a few discussions this week with many of you about your walk with God and it became apparent to me that a little refresher might be helpful.

In almost every teaching, I find a way to work in a little phrase: you must let God be your ultimate **priority** and the absolute **authority** in your life. I know that sometimes when you hear something over and over again that you tend to let it just pass in and out of your head without giving it much consideration as if you have taken for granted that you already know what I am talking about and fully understand this truth. But if in your life this truth is only rooted in knowledge, I guarantee you it will be empty of its transforming power and will be good for little more than finding its place on a bumper sticker as a new Christian cliché.

This truth, however, must be rooted in both knowledge and experience and the gateway is a belief which results in choice. In other words, you are to make decisions for your life that are in alignment with God's Word and His voice in your life because you are absolutely convinced that all that God says is true.

Remember, the battlefield is in your mind; therefore, for God to be your ultimate **priority** and the absolute **authority** in your life, you must be willing to separate yourself from the embedded patterns of thinking within your mind and let God and His Word in your life become the truth through which you filter all else. To accomplish this, you must also learn how to set aside the emotions that tend to control you and which influence your perspective of people and situations.

Think of it like an old dilapidated house sitting on a plot of land. If you want to build your dream house filled with all the modern conveniences that make life so easy and pleasurable, surrounded by amazing landscaping, you first have to level and remove the old house and in so doing tear apart the yard. Then you have to haul all the garbage away. Once that is done, you are clear to start building your dream house and landscaping your own personal work of art.

However, few of us take this approach. Most of us like to build new additions on the old house and we spread new seed in the midst of weeds. When we finish the addition we feel good about our effort; but in reality, all we have built—all our investment—is at risk for it sits upon an old dilapidated house that one day might just collapse taking the addition down with it.

For example, you may be struggling with insecurity or even your base identity and after some of these teachings on relationships with unbelievers, you might be feeling a bit convicted about where you go to find your source of comfort, acceptance and self-worth. Maybe the Holy Spirit has been slowly bringing it to your attention. So perhaps you decide to do what every good Christian does and turn to the Bible, as if it is some form of prescription medicine, and start fervently reading and praying. You sincerely hope that in “coming to God” you will find your relief, your answer, and the peace within for which you so desperately seek.

Well let me just stay that although I am glad that you have made a decision to read your Bible and to pray (it is a good thing given the alternatives), I want to warn you, that “coming to God” in this manner, as if He is just good medicine, is not the pathway to experiencing all of Him. In fact, “doing” of any sorts, even reading and praying, is only a temporary fix and will not lead you to the sustained peace, contentment, and fulfillment which is to be yours in Jesus Christ. The pathway to peace is only found through believing the truth; or said another way, betting your life on the character and nature of Christ which is clearly revealed to us in the Word. In other words, you still have to decide that you are going to let God have **priority** in your life over all else and that you are going to let Him be the sole source of **authority** in your life.

By **priority** I mean that you must be preoccupied and even obsessed with seeking God. Please, don't let that phrase “seeking God” become to you just another cliché. Your life, your stability, your security, and yes even your identity will be found when you seek the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul. Therefore, nothing else is to have a greater priority in your life than your need to truly know Him.

The Word of God is not just a place to turn and seek comfort when you get stuck, feel bad, or find yourself eating the rotten fruit of the choices you have made. It is to be to you the very source of your life.

It is to be to you the living manna that feeds your soul. You must remember that Jesus said that He is the “I Am.” As such, He is the only answer to the longing, the emptiness, the pain, the insecurity, and the isolation in your heart.

Therefore, when I say that you must know God, I am not just talking about knowing of Him or even knowing about Him; rather I am talking about personally **experiencing** Him in His fullness. After all, isn't that what relationships are about, experiencing all that there is to know about another person. This is what God desires for you and you are to make the pursuit of that **experience** your priority.

By ultimate **authority**, I mean that nothing is to have a voice in your life that speaks with greater authority over your thoughts, emotions, and decisions than does the Word of God and His voice in your life. The word “**ultimate**” pretty much rules out all else. Let me ask you some questions:

- When God says that He has redefined and reprioritized your relationships, do you make choices according to that truth or do you insist on doing it your way? Do you try to play both sides of the field? Do you just sit there until the pain gets too overwhelming?
- When God says that you are to know His will for your life, are you still convinced that you cannot really find it and so you just continue shooting in the dark hoping that He has your back covered?
- When God says that you can understand what is right, just, and fair, and you can know how to find the right course of action every time, do you struggle believing that this is not just some fanciful tale?
- When you sin, do you feel guilty, ashamed, as if you have disappointed God, or do you remember that every accusation that could ever be made against you was nailed to the cross; and as such, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?
- Do you still look to religious duties, traditions, and customs as necessary in order for you to be right with God?
- When God says that He is the way and the truth, are you still looking to religion, science, intellectualism, philosophy, relationships, and so on for your answers?

There are just a few illustrative questions, I could go on and on, but the point is that if your choices do not align up with what is true in the Word of God, then you have allowed something other than God to have authority and to set the direction for your life. As a result, you can read your Bible all you want, you can pray, go to church and even do great acts of service for God, but you still will not experience the “I Am” in His fullness, and you will experience little if any of the life transforming power that is to be yours.

You simply must let the pursuit of knowing and experiencing all of God become your absolute **priority** and you must let the Word of God and His voice in your life become the ultimate **authority** for each and every decision that you make. It does not matter how small or how large the decision, God wants to be at the center of it all calling the shots in your life. There is no other way. If you are still sitting on the fence, watching from the boat, analyzing and intellectualizing, doing your religious duty of reading and praying, you are going to be continually frustrated with your life.

Instead, when you read your Bible, or on Sundays as I have been teaching you His Word, and discover some truth about God or about how He wants you to live you are to follow through with the work of pushing aside and dismantling all the emotional and psychological structures, all the filters of protection, and all the so called “realities” that you have established in your mind. It all must be torn down and replaced with the truth that comes from God. For example, the truth about who you are in God, the truth about your **New Creation**, and the truth about your *Old Man*.

Don't build on the old house; start new. Remember you are a child of God and within your **New Creation** dwells the Holy Spirit of God. You are His temple. Build on this truth. Your *Old Man* is rotten through and through and if you continue to build on that old house, you risk total loss.

Matthew 7:24-27

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and **acts** on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. “And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. “Everyone who hears these words of Mine and **does not act** on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. “The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell — and great was its fall.”

God’s word and His voice in your life have to become the only filter through which you pass all your thoughts, all your emotions, and all your choices; in fact, it must become the lens through which you see all else: your relationships, your purpose, your value, your worth, and your identity. Fundamentally, this is the work that God requires of you. This is the work of believing; the work of obedience! This is the only pathway to experiencing the transformed life.

Consider One Another

Now, with that in mind, let’s move on to understanding some of the primary responsibilities we have to each other as family, as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived at the house where he was teaching. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd around Jesus, and someone said, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” Jesus replied, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Then he looked at those around him and said, “These are my mother and brothers. **Anyone who does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.**”

As a starting place, I do not want you to spiritualize this verse. In the same way that Jesus was not joking when He said: “I am the way the truth and the life,” Jesus was not joking when He said that His family is comprised of those individuals who seek the will of His Father.

Jesus was not establishing some kind of church lingo and practice where we go around saying hello Brother Taylor, Brother Ian, and Sister Sarah. No, there is no mistaking what Jesus was doing. His purpose was to shatter the world view of those who followed Him. He was tearing down and demolishing the natural, practical, emotional, psychological, and religious structures that they had built in their mind and in their emotions and which permeated their life.

Jesus was introducing a new reality; a world that they did not know truly existed: a spiritual realm whose economy, relationships, and general operation are fundamentally in opposition to all that is in the world. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that as believers they are just aliens and strangers in this earthly place (**1 Peter 1:1; 2:11**) and that they belong to another world altogether as they are part of God’s household (**Ephesians 2:19**).

And this message goes out to us as well. Jesus wants us to live as members of His household; He wants us to live in this new paradigm where we realize that we are related by blood and spirit. We have been adopted into this family through the blood of Jesus Christ and we are brought into **oneness** through the same Spirit of God which we all share.

This scripture provides us an opportunity to apply what we talked about earlier regarding God being our **priority** and the absolute **authority** in our lives. Here is an opportunity for you to let the Word of God have its proper place in your life and shatter all the structures that you have here to date established in your mind and in your emotions.

For most of us, it is very hard to even consider that God might actually want us to place a priority, a focus, an emphasis, and the highest value on some of those who are sitting in this room. It all seems so surreal; after all, we have our families, our friends, and our own social circles. But each of us must come face to face with what Jesus taught. If you are going to **experience** Him in His fullness, you must set aside

what is comfortable, what is rational, and what is expected, and let God's word redefine your reality.

Philippians 2:1-8

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ***Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*** Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In this instruction to the church at Philippi, like Jesus, Paul intends to shatter the world-view of every person who ever reads this letter. Paul makes a plea for absolute unity and ***oneness*** amongst believers, unlike anything that has ever been heard, taught, or experienced. It's as if what Jesus said was not radical enough,

Matthew 22:37-40

Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

After all, most of us have serious issues with this idea of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Practically, experientially, we still look out for "number one" as our default way of approaching life. Yes, we may give consideration to others, but it is almost always after we have first taken care of ourselves in one way, shape or form. But then Paul, by the Spirit of God, takes it another step further. For those who are in Christ, for those who walk in the fellowship of the Spirit, we are to have the same mind, the same love, united in spirit, and intent on ***one*** purpose: valuing our brothers and sisters in the Lord greater than we value ourselves.

Please understand this is not love others "as" you love yourself; rather, you are to consider the needs of your brothers and sisters in the Lord in preference and in priority to your needs, your comfort, your convenience, your wants, and your desires, regardless of how that will impact your little universe. This is a totally new paradigm of thinking that is so foreign to everything within us. This commandment strikes at the heart of all that is natural and all that we have believed is necessary for our own personal survival. But according to the Holy Spirit, this is to be our intentional way of living.

Now I want to stop and clarify what this verse is not saying. Sometimes, even mentioning scriptures like this results in people feeling guilty and responsible and then with all good intention they go off and try and love others so they can be ok with God. Or they go home, with good intention, and try and pull this off with their spouse, their family members or whomever. Honestly, don't even try it. Trust me, you will only fail; besides, it will likely produce all sorts of dysfunctional behavior in your life and in the lives of those you are "trying" to love.

What Paul is saying is that if you are in fellowship with the Spirit, this is what your life will look like. Again, you can look at this as another personal temperature check. If however you find your thoughts are primarily centered on you, and the things that concern you, then it is a pretty good sign that you are not walking in the fellowship of the Spirit of God; rather, you are living from your *Old Man*. And since the problem is that you are living from your *Old Man*, the solution is not about going and "doing" in an attempt to be obedient to God. That is the approach of religion and that is why few Christians learn how to love in this manner.

In God, the right answer to our sinful condition always comes down to believing. You must be willing to

first and foremost prioritize God in your life and let His Word be the ultimate **authority** in your life. In other words, you must be willing to let the Word of God impact your world view and destroy the structures upon which you have built your life.

Let's take a look at what that might practically look like in this context. Paul says that Jesus provides for us the perfect example of what we are to believe. Consider the following. Jesus is part of the triune Godhead. He is the creator of the universe and in Him all things are held together. He is perfect and holy, worthy of eternal glory and praise. He is worthy of all honor and all worship. In fact in continuation of this passage in Philippians 2:9-11, we are told that one day everyone will give Him the honor that is due His name.

Philippians 2:9-11

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Yet, despite what He is due, despite what His position and stature demand, He was willing to lay it aside just to come here and reestablish a way for all of humanity to be in relationship with the Father. He laid it all down and was hurt, humiliated, insulted, rejected, beaten and ultimately killed by mere humans just because He valued having a relationship with us so much that He considered it worth giving up His own life. This kind of love is inconceivable! Yet, this is the heart and soul of Agape love.

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

This is why I keep telling you that when we love with God's love, we live the supernatural life. We become a walking miracle that no one will be able to deny. As Jesus said in **John 17**, when we love in this way, those in the world will know that God exists and sent His Son because they will see Him living in and through our lives.

Now the Bible gives us some deeper insight as to why Jesus was able to love in this manner. The "why" is very important for us to understand; it will help us comprehend the reasons we are to believe. Jesus was obedient to His Father because He knew and believed that the Father was going to restore to Him not only to His glory but the Father would also give Him this huge family. In fact, it was this reward (you and me) that provided His very motivation for coming to earth and giving up His life.

Isaiah 53:10-12

But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, **he will have a multitude of children**, many heirs. He will enjoy a long life, and the LORD's plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins. I will give him the honors of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death. He was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, **who for the joy set before Him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

In the same manner, in true humility, we are to believe, truly believe, that our brothers and sisters in the Lord are worthy of greater consideration than ourselves. This requires some serious deconstruction of the old house in which we live. What Jesus asks of us is extremely radical and if taken seriously, it is quite scary. That is why you cannot do this on our own. In order for you to truly believe what Jesus asks you to believe, you must first be absolutely convinced beyond any doubt that He loves you, He cares for you, His eyes are constantly on you, and that if you are obedient to Him in this manner, He will be the very provision for all your needs.

These core beliefs are what undergird your ability to consider others as more important than yourself. If you do not believe these base truths about our Father then, there is no way you can step out of the boat and attempt to walk on water. There is no way! But like Jesus who believed that the Father would both restore His glory and give Him this great family, you must also believe that the Father knows your needs and will meet them.

If this is true, then logically and emotionally, there is no personal risk to considering others as more important than yourself. There is no real threat to living in such a way that you do **nothing** from selfishness and it is therefore ok to stop trying to impress others by bringing attention to yourself in ways that do not align up with the nature and character of God.

The starting place for supernatural living is belief. You must believe that your Father in heaven can do a better job of taking care of you than you are able to do. You have learned how to survive in this world, but it is time to pull those thoughts, habits, techniques out from their roots, and it is time to trust Jesus with your life for real and start being genuinely concerned about your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Now, I want to step back again and make sure that no one runs out of here with wrong belief. I am not talking about walking around here making a big ridiculous deal about trying to consider others in some self-righteous, self-sacrificing, and self-deprecating way. No that is weird and will not honor God. That would be just vain empty religious behavior which lacks the spirit of humility that Jesus demonstrated for us.

I am talking about the same thing I have always talked about. If you seek God with your heart, mind, and soul, and if you make choices for your life in alignment with the Word of God, because you fundamentally believe it to be true, then you will know how to love and consider others. The Spirit will lead you in various situations and you will consider others in the family of God as more important than yourself and you will love them as He loves you.

You will love with the wisdom of God and utilize all the different faces of God's Agape love as the situation demands. You will encourage and build up others as He sustains you in His hand. Again, don't spiritualize this truth. The expression of your right beliefs will be extremely practical and others will know it.

Let's close by looking at Jesus' perspective of why we can live free from the need to just be concerned about ourselves. These verses provide the reason we can believe that God has our back covered and therefore we are free to give others preference and make them our priority.

Matthew 6:25-34

"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?" And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." But seek **first** His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

I do not believe this is just talking about our physical needs, I believe Jesus is talking about all our needs. And although Jesus uses the example of food and clothing His point is very clear. We are to trust God with our lives. Our obsession and our priority is to first and foremost be His kingdom. He knows our needs, He knows what is important to us, and He has our back. Thus, in the humility of true belief, in the fellowship of the Spirit, we are free to be set apart so that the will of our Father in Heaven is done here on earth in and through our lives. We are free to be others centered, we are free to value our brothers and sisters in the Lord with such a high regard that we just love them with God's Agape love.

If you are struggling with believing the truth in this area of our redefined relationships, or in any area that the Bible speaks so clearly into your life, make it a matter of obsessive prayer. As we studied last week, the Spirit will be the one to provide for you the ability to believe. You just have to want it and you have to seek it; and seek it **first** above all else.

Let's pray.



Redefined Relationships - 3f

Philippians 2:1-8

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ***Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*** Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

I don't know about you, but I thought that last week's teaching on this scripture was incredibly intense. I've been trying to grasp the reality that a full expression of God's Agape love means that I have to consider others as more important than myself and I have to look out for their interest and not just my own. It is all very unnatural.

Therefore, what I hope that you took away from that teaching was that in order to experience this reality in your life, you have to be willing to let the Word of God be the ***authority*** over your life. It does not matter if this way of existing is foreign to you, the mere fact that God says we are to have that kind of humility means that you must let this truth reign supreme in your mind and your emotions. You must then choose, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to make choices in accordance with that truth.

That is how faith will be birthed into your life. If this is the path you choose soon you will find that loving others with God's Agape love is your first and natural response. You will find that you will no longer be obsessed with you and how things impact you, but you will legitimately be concerned for your brother or sister in the Lord. This will be a supernatural thing of beauty that will knock the socks off of everyone.

I will give you an example. I was talking to a guy this week that had a shot to do something pretty cool with his life. He had an opportunity that most people with his skill and passion would die for. But he walked away from it believing that God has told him to focus his life investing in the people that God has assigned to him. Others in his life (especially those who are not believers but know of this choice) have told him that they think he is crazy and that they just do not understand him at all. They are confused and I think their confusion is marvelous.

Wow a real life miracle; someone who does not just think about their own personal interests but prioritizes the needs, concerns, interests, and preferences of others.

The other key take away from last week's study is that God provides us the very reason and motivation to allow something as "unnatural" as thinking of others as more important than ourselves. God assures us that if we are willing to walk by faith in this issue that He has our back. He wants us to understand that if we make the choice to prioritize His kingdom in our lives above all else, then He will provide for our needs, for He tells us that He already knows what we need before we even utter a word to Him. And if that is the case, there is no real personal threat or risk to giving others preference according to the wisdom that God gives us for each situation in our life. We are free to love with the face or faces of love that God asks us to display. Any risk that we perceive, and threat, is illusory and is rooted in pride, fear, and insecurity and it does not derive from the truth.

This brings us to another critical aspect of how this reprioritization of our relationships, others over self, is to practically mete itself out in our lives. Our text is found in Chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 3:14-4:6

When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, 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 give you** mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your **roots go down deep** into the soil of God's marvelous love. 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** really is. May you **experience the love of Christ**, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. **Then you will be filled** with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen.

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. **Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.** Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace. We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all.

Let's start out with the beginning part of these verses and I want us to zero on the critical components of what Paul is communicating. First of all, Paul is just flabbergasted by the wisdom and magnitude of God's plan for our lives. This upside down/inside out way of living that He has called us to is unfathomable.

Paul also marveled at God's plan to unite all true believers, Jews and Gentiles, into one family by the blood of Jesus Christ and by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit of God. After all, for centuries these races had been divided; hostility was the only commonality, and the walls of religious separation were impassable.

Yet, in one act, in one moment in time, by the death of one man, none of that mattered anymore. Instantly there was common ground—the marvelous love of God. And Paul was privileged to see this become a reality in the lives of those to whom He was sent. That is why when He even thinks of God's wonderful plan it causes Him to just fall down on His knees and pray. It's as if the understanding of God's love just compels him to lift up his voice on behalf of those in Ephesus and I believe on behalf of everyone who would ever read his letter.

Paul then prays that God will be the one to provide us inner strength through the Holy Spirit within our **New Creation**. The strength to believe God and trust Him with our lives; the strength to make God our **priority**; and the strength to let His Word be the ultimate **authority** over our lives. And as that becomes our reality, as we trust God, Jesus will take authority over more and more of our being; or said another way, He will be more at home in our hearts.

Our trust, our faith, our willingness to make choices to align our thoughts, our emotions, our decisions, and our actions with His Word and His voice in our lives is rooted in our understanding of how much God really does love us. Just like the example we talked about last week. When we know that God has our back, then is there really any risk to giving others preference according to the wisdom that God gives us for the moment?

Think about the word picture Paul uses. Our roots are to dig down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. The roots of a tree not only suck up the nutrients from the soil and thereby enable the tree to grow and expand, but as the roots spread and dig down deep, the tree becomes more and more stable, able to resist the wind and torrents that come against it.

That is what our understanding of the love of God does for our faith. It not only causes us to grow up, it also makes us steadfast and immovable no longer tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, every wind of thought, every wind of circumstance, or even every wind of tragedy, that comes against our lives.

And as we relinquish ourselves to His love, as we come to believe the depth, width, height and magnitude of His love for us as individuals, as chosen ones of God, we will begin to **experience** His life as He lives in

and through us. This is probably one of the most powerful truths that if we really grasped it, our lives would be radically altered forever. We would be free and safe to believe all the other “intangible” realities of God.

This is why the enemy does everything he can to convince you that God does not really love you. The enemy tells you that if God really loved you then He would not have allowed this or that tragedy to happen in your life. He tells you that you obviously must look out for your own best interests because God is not going to do it for you. He tells you that God is really not interested in the details of your life, so you just need to go and take care of yourself. And one of my favorites, the enemy tells you that God will not really talk to you about His will for your life so the enemy encourages you to just go and live your life based on the desires of your heart.

As a result of the enemies incessant babbling, we start to believe the lie, which by definition means we don't believe the truth. Some of us swallow the lies hook, line, and sinker and develop patterns in our life that at the core of our being do not allow room for trusting God to be who and what He says He is. And over time we tend to marginalize what God says in His Word so we do not have to let it speak authoritatively in our lives; as that is the only way we can continue to live in the lie.

Why do we trust the lie? After all it is the devil talking and nothing he says lines up with what is revealed to us in the Word of God. I believe it is because we are still so conditioned to live by what is tangible, what makes sense to us, what feels right; and, as a result, the experiences in our life and the personal filters through which we pass everything through tend to confirm the reality of each lie.

And when it comes down to it, each of us has expectations of God that are not centered in truth but are centered in our comfort, our perception of what we need, and our desire to have God be to us what we want Him to be.

This is why the **authority** of the Word of God over your life must be central to your very existence: it must reign supreme over your thoughts, your emotions, your experiences, and even over all your expectations for this life. Remember, God's goal for your life is that you are conformed to the image of His Son in order that He might be free to live in and through your life so you can experience a full expression of His Agape love. That is His goal. He will therefore use any and all circumstances to provide you opportunity after opportunity to choose to believe the truth about His love for you.

That is why Paul says that when you become convinced, regardless of your feelings and regardless of your emotions that waiver with each passing circumstance, that God truly loves you beyond compare **then** you will start to experience this love and **then** you will be filled with the fullness of **life** and **power** that comes from God. In other words, like Paul you will be able to say:

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and this life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Where else can you find life and power? Surely you have not been able to find it looking to yourself to be your guardian, your protector and your lover. Most of us have failed in that regard and will always fail; we just are not God. The love of God, however, is marvelous, and although it is incomprehensible in its entirety, it is ours.

Then Paul tells us that all glory belongs to God because it is His power it is His life at work in ours that will allow us to accomplish infinitely more than we ever dare to ask or hope. That word “infinitely” is a pretty big word and it describes what God wants to do in and through our lives. It is not our power and we cannot claim any credit. We cannot even fathom what is possible in the mind of God if we are willing to relent of our pride, our fear, and our insecurity and surrender to the reality of His love for our lives.

This brings to mind something that Jesus said that to me was always a bit confusing; however, this passage in Ephesians makes it absolutely believable.

John 14:11-14

“Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”

Jesus is telling us that if we truly believe in Him that we, as a body of believers, would do works that are far greater in magnitude than He ever did. And when we ask according to His will, which according to 1 John 14-15 is the definition of asking in His name, He will do it. He will be the one to do the works in and through our lives so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. And since the Father is the one doing it through the Son through our lives, almost by definition it will be more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. That is why Paul says glory be to God! May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen.

This brings us to the central purpose of this passage. After this big set up exploring the love of God and His work in our lives, Paul brings it all together in a practical application. Because of all of this incredible benefit in our lives, because of His love and willingness to do amazing things through us, we are to live a life that is worthy of His calling on our life. **His love is to be our motivation.** Therefore we are to be humble and gentle. We are to be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of God's Agape love which has been poured into our lives and out from our lives.

We are to be **humble**: again, considering our brothers and sisters as more important than ourselves because we know that absent God's love for us we are as undeserving as the next person. This means we have no right to raise our heads over another, despite their faults, as if we are superior to them. We are all sinners saved by the grace and mercy of God. The following passage should help you solidify this concept in your mind.

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. So practice and obey whatever they say to you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called ‘Rabbi.’ Don't ever let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don't let anyone call you ‘Master,’ for there is only one master, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

You got it? We are all on the same level and no one deserves to lift their head up in pride and arrogance over a brother and sister in the Lord. Rather, in humility we are to serve each other; and, in the context of dealing with each other's faults and weaknesses, we are to serve by being gentle, patient, and making allowance for each other's issues. Keep in mind, any success you have had in your walk with God is a result of Him doing the work in you and through you, so all glory and praise be to God, not to you. Besides, history shows that it is not a good idea to steal God's glory. It belongs to Him and Him alone.

What's more, we all have issues. Every one of us has areas in our life that really bug someone else. That is because we are all still trapped in these bodies of flesh so we still find ourselves struggling believing God in the critical areas of our life. As a result, we still find that there are times when we walk from our Old Man and our faults are out there laid bare for everyone to see. Sure it is embarrassing, but it is part of life and part of our shared reality. Therefore, it is a good idea to deal with each other in humility, gentleness, and understanding for if we really wanted to get into a tit for tat over each other's faults

we would all lose. In fact, the only one who would win is the enemy who would be behind the scenes provoking such horrific behavior.

Now I want to make this next point very clear. I do not believe that being humble, gentle, and understanding means that we do not get mad and at times even angry with our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Those things are not opposites and in and of themselves they do not stand in contrast to each other. In fact, I think that they can work hand in hand.

Conflict is a reality, a necessity, and sometimes the only way through which any of us wake up and deal with truth. But being humble, gentle, and understanding has more to do with next part of this verse where Paul reminds us that we are to stay united in the Holy Spirit and bind ourselves together with peace. In other words, our conflict, our disputes, our arguments, and our fights, cannot become a source of division. That would be wrong and that would be sin.

When it is all said and done, we are to have a loyalty that binds us to each other regardless of our faults and regardless of our conflicts. That is why we get the following instruction from Paul:

Ephesians 4:25-27

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.

Most of us have been trained to believe that being angry is sin; after all, outbursts of anger finds itself in the list of deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:20; Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8). I believe that dwelling in anger is a fruit of the flesh and is sin for it will corrupt the soul. But getting angry in and of itself is not sin. The idea is not to let the sun go down on your anger.

Let me explain. Contrary to a lot of teaching, I do not believe that this passage means that every day before sunset you have to go and make sure all your conflicts are resolved. That would be a nice ideal, but that is a burden far too heavy to carry. Circumstances and other people do not allow for that. I believe this passage means that you cannot let the light of God's truth, and His love, His mercy, and His forgiveness ever fade in your life such that you are left with only bitterness and darkness in your heart. That will be what gives opportunity to the devil (in fact that is a satanic slam dunk).

I know that many of you harbor a lot of hurt and a lot of pain from people in your life, and many of you from those who you thought were supposed to love you the most. The way they have treated you has cut deep and has caused unimaginable emotional and psychological pain. I encourage you to deal with that hurt in truth and not in denial, deception, or lies. And if you need help doing that, I can help you and there are people here in our body who are professionally trained to assist in this process. But it is essential that you deal with those hurts in truth and do not let them sit in your heart because over time they will root into bitterness and that will bring darkness into your life and the enemy will be able to toy with you at will and work his plan of destruction. Don't fall into this trap; don't fall prey to his schemes.

James 1:19-20

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and **slow to anger**; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

So again, being humble, gentle, and understanding does not mean you will never get angry. It means that you will be slow to anger and you will not let the sun go down on your anger for you realize that you are, in reality, no different than the person you are angry at; you have your issues and there are people in your life who feel the same way about you as you do this person in your life. Therefore, in humility you are willing to show grace and extend love and mercy and despite your feelings you are willing to still consider them more important than yourself.

We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future. If we are mean, hurtful, or cruel to our brothers and sisters in the Lord then we are actually being mean, hurtful, and cruel to our own body. That is insanity.

Most healthy people do not get angry and then go out and intentionally maim a part of their own body; in fact, we try and take care of our body. And if one part is hurt or is unseemly in any way, we try and doctor it up and baby it. We care for it. We know that our toe is not independent of our foot, and our foot is not independent of our hands. To get the maximum benefit and performance from our body, we want every part to function in the manner it was designed to function without harm and without pain, especially self-inflicted harm and pain.

We must view our brothers and sisters in the Lord in this same regard. It is a lie that any of us are independent of the other. We are connected by the same Spirit and we all have the same future awaiting us. And one day we are going to fulfill Jesus prayer in John 17 by being **one** as He is **one** with the Father.

Therefore, if we let each other's weaknesses become a reason that we don't fellowship with each other, that we don't look out for each other, and we don't consider each other, **then** we are not walking in love. We are not walking in the Spirit of God; rather, we are serving our flesh.

There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all. Because there is only one God, we must let His Word have that place of absolute **priority** and ultimate **authority** in our life. Each of you must therefore take this instruction that you have received and deal with it. You must decide are you going to align your thoughts, your emotions, and your choices with the Word of God, or are you going to still manage your life and your relationships according to your own wisdom?

Are you going to consider one another as more important than yourself? Are you going to deal with each other on the basis of humility, gentleness and understanding, or are you going to continue to separate and divide, pick and choose, because you focus on the faults and weaknesses of your brothers and sisters in the Lord?

There is One God, One Father, One Faith, One Baptism, One authority; and, therefore, only One response: the obedience of faith. I plead with you to choose accordingly. I plead with you to value each other and genuinely and sincerely agree with God in this matter and love as deeply and intently you are loved.

I know that for those of you who have been deeply hurt by others this is very hard. It means you would once again have to trust and become vulnerable. In fact, many of you are even reluctant to trust God fearing that He might allow you to once again be hurt. And I know many of you have developed some intense methods and techniques to make sure you don't ever get hurt again. You have built walls of emotional and psychological protection.

But please understand, you have built a weak and feeble house that will fall given enough wind of circumstance, and the fall will be great. It is time to let the love of Jesus in all the way into those deep recesses of pain, betrayal, and hurt. Let the height, depth, and width of His love fall on you and fill you up. Because He is the only One, I can assure you He can be trusted with everything within you. Let His glorious, unlimited resources give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit so that you can love others as an overflow and a natural extension of His love for you.

Let's pray.



The Faces of Love

Without Prejudice - 4a

John 3:16

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Well after series a through f of part 3, Redefined Relationships, we are now moving on to another face of God's Agape love. God's Agape love for mankind is entirely without prejudice. It does not matter what race you are from and it matters not if you are a male or a female, rich or poor, His love has always freely been offered to anyone who was willing to believe.

I know that from a casual observance many would probably argue with this conclusion. After all, if God so loved the world, as it says in **John 3:16**, then why for thousands of years did He only reveal Himself to the Jews before making Himself broadly available to the Gentiles? Seems a little strange and a little on the side of national prejudice.

Similarly, right now during this period of time that the Bible refers to as the time of the Gentiles, where the gospel is being poured out on the nations, isn't God showing prejudice against the Jews? After all, does not the Bible say that has God blinded the eyes of the Jew so that they do not come to Him?

For the casual observer of Christianity, these may seem like valid observations; however, this kind of thinking is very narrow in terms of a comprehensive Biblical understanding of God. It is very easy for the casual observer to confuse methodology with prejudice; but that would be a huge mistake. The fact that God chose, throughout time, various methods to bring His Word to mankind does not in any way disparage His claim to love the world.

It is also very easy to look at the prejudicial error and the sin of those who have claimed to be "God's elect" and think that the sin of man reflects the character and nature of God's love. But again, that would be a huge mistake. God's Agape love is without prejudice. You may be uncomfortable with His methods and you may be entirely unimpressed with His people, but it is critical that you understand this principle for it is a pillar of truth that is intended to invade our lives and impact how we relate to each other.

So tonight, I am going to lay down some Biblical principles for you to understand so you can separate any sentiment you might have regarding God's chosen methodology from the reality of God's love, His plan, and His purposes for the world.

God Loves the World

When God says in **John 3:16** that He loves the world, He means that He loves the world. In fact, Paul tells us that it is God's very heart for everyone to be saved, which is why Jesus died for the sins of **all** mankind.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, **who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

And in the Old Testament, God invites everyone to turn to Him for salvation.

Isaiah 45:22

Turn to Me and be saved, ***all the ends of the earth***; For I am God, and there is no other.

Salvation has always been available for anyone who would turn to the Lord and by faith chooses to believe. God did not offer His salvation to one people group and discard another. Notice it says that the ransom was paid for all; thus, God's offer of salvation has gone out to all the ends of the earth consistent with His desire that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

Always Only One Way to God

In addition, from the beginning of time, there have not been different rules for different people. There has always been one way, and one way only, for men and women to have a right relationship with God, and that is by faith.

Romans 1:17

This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life" [quoted from ***Habakkuk 2:4***].

Old Testament/New Testament, the way was the same, by faith. Take for example, Abraham. Here was this gentile that God choose from out of the pagan territory known as UR of the Chaldeans. We don't know a lot about these people, but we can infer from the book of Job that at that time the Chaldeans were a barbarous war like people who lived to invade and ravish others.

Job 1:17 tells us that it was the Chaldeans who attacked and killed all of Job's servants and stole his camels. And from the story of Abraham in ***Genesis 14***, where he and 318 men attacked and devastated a massive army of 4-kings, it is likely that Abraham's profession was that of a professional warrior, which would also partly explain why the nations gave him so much latitude when he was traveling through their territory.

History also tells us that the Chaldeans were involved in a form of moon cult worship. Yet, out of this godless pagan group of warring people, God choose Abraham to know Him. Abraham was not of some special lineage, or even of some special religious heritage, he was just a heathen sinner like most of the people of the day, who worshiped the creation instead of the creator.

Further, when God declared Abraham to be righteous, he was not circumcised and he had performed no special religious deeds; he just simply believed what God had promised Him. And it was through his belief that he was justified before God (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

The point I am trying to make is that throughout time, Old Testament and New Testament, it has not mattered if a person was a Jew or a Gentile, of this religion or that religion; everyone had the opportunity to believe in the creator of the universe and be saved. Therefore, the issue has never been that God's love was exclusively given to only one people; rather, the problem with the Gentiles in the Old Testament and the Jews in the New Testament is that for the most part they did not want to believe; they needed more. They wanted to either be little gods themselves or they wanted to be ok with God on their own terms, not God's.

You might reply by saying that you could understand that was the problem with the Jews, for God had clearly revealed Himself to them, but how could the Gentiles have believed if God did not make Himself known except to a select few? The fact that God revealed Himself to Abraham and his descendents does not seem fair at all; the others did not have a chance, at least not for real.

Again, this is a casual observation that is not supported by the scriptures. The book of Romans has the answer. Paul tells us that from the beginning God revealed Himself to all mankind; therefore, everyone is

without excuse and all rightly fall under the judgment of God.

Romans 1:18-25; 2:14-15

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.

Even when Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, instinctively follow what the law says, they show that in their hearts they know right from wrong. They demonstrate that God's law is written within them, for their own consciences either accuse them or tell them they are doing what is right.

Deep down inside, everyone knows about God; but for the most part they just reject what is so obvious. Through His creation, and through our conscience, God has made Himself known to all mankind; yes even to the pygmy in Africa. God has offered salvation, without prejudice, to everyone who is willing to acknowledge Him and believe even just enough to say thanks.

In fact, Joel 2:32 tells us that "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." And Hebrews 11:2 confirms for us that it was through faith, through belief, that all the men and women of old found their approval before God.

There has always been one way, and one way only, for men and women to have a right relationship with God, and that is by faith. As I close this point, turn to Isaiah 45:20, and look at the impassioned plea that God makes publicly to both Israel and the nations of the earth:

Isaiah 45:18-25

For the Lord is God, and he created the heavens and earth and put everything in place. He made the world to be lived in, not to be a place of empty chaos."I am the Lord," he says," and there is no other. I publicly proclaim bold promises. **I do not whisper obscurities in some dark corner.** I would not have told the people of Israel to seek me if I could not be found. I, the Lord, speak only what is true and declare only what is right.

"Gather together and come, you fugitives from surrounding nations. What fools they are who carry around their wooden idols and pray to gods that cannot save! Consult together, argue your case. Get together and decide what to say. Who made these things known so long ago? What idol ever told you they would happen? Was it not I, the Lord? For there is no other God but me, a righteous God and Savior. There is none but me.

Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. I have sworn by my own name; I have spoken the truth, and I will never go back on my word: Every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to me." The people will declare, "The Lord is the source of all my righteousness and strength." And all who were angry with him will come to him and be ashamed. In the Lord all the generations of Israel will be justified, and in him they will boast.

God has publicly declared to the entire world that He is God and that He is the only One to whom we can look to for salvation. He has sent out an open invitation, without prejudice, to all who are willing to turn, listen and believe: to Jews, to Gentiles, to males, to females, to the rich and to the poor. All are invited and all have the opportunity to be made one in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:28-29

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

God's Methodology

I want to spend a moment talking about God's methodology so you don't confuse the issue of prejudice with the means through which God accomplishes His purposes. God chose many means to reveal Himself to the world. Some of His means were exclusive, and therefore looked prejudicial, and some were all encompassing. But either way, they were all towards one objective: revealing His love for mankind.

For example, we have established that 1) God has imprinted His law on our hearts, and the conscience of every man, woman, or child who has ever lived is the evidence of this truth; and 2) He has revealed Himself through all of creation.

However, because of the stubbornness and hardness of our hearts, and our refusal to honor God, and because of His great and unprejudiced love, He also chose the nation of Israel to be the people through which the nations of the world would hear and know about God. We find this first revealed in God's promise to Abraham.

Genesis 22:16-18

This is what the Lord says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants **all the nations of the earth will be blessed**—all because you have obeyed me.

Beginning with Abraham, God revealed His glory to the Jews. He made covenants with them and He gave His Law to them. This has caused many to believe, including the Jew, that God's love was only for the Jew and not for the Gentile. But that is all wrong. Yes, the Jews were privileged to be the instrument through which God revealed Himself to the nations, and, as a result they have a higher accountability for their knowledge and experience with God; but keep in mind, the Jews were just a means to an end. For from their seed, from the nation of Israel, would spring one who would be the light to the nations and according to **Hebrews 5:9**, the very source of salvation for all mankind.

Isaiah 11:1-5

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will delight in obeying the Lord. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.

Jesus was the shoot, the new Branch and God chose to send the Savior of the world to Israel, in order to bring His message of salvation by grace through faith first to the Jews and then to the Gentile nations. Yes, God sent Jesus to those who should have known Him and welcomed Him. But their hearts were hard and they rejected Him; therefore, God used their rejection to send His message (again through the Jewish apostles) to the ends of the earth.

The Jews, through their hatred and persecution of Christians, which caused the early disciples to flee to other nations, in effect pushed the gospel out to the Gentile nations. The Jews once again were the very instrument through which God's purposes were fulfilled and His love for mankind was announced to the entire world. You see God's purposes can never be thwarted by our failures.

And this story continues today. God has hardened the hearts of the Jews, in accordance with their wishes, and has allowed the gospel message to flow freely through the Gentile nations. But, before you label God with being prejudiced against the Jews, and turn your heart against them, you must understand God's methodology is always to affect His ultimate desire. He loves the Jews and has a plan for their restoration. In fact, even now, a few are being saved as a result of God's kindness in choosing them. Paul explains God's plan:

Romans 11:7-12

So this is the situation: Most of the Jews have not found the favor of God they are looking for so earnestly. A few have – the ones God has chosen – but the rest were made unresponsive. As the Scriptures say,

“God has put them into a deep sleep. To this day he has shut their eyes so they do not see, and closed their ears so they do not hear.” Likewise, David said, “Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well. Let their blessings cause them to stumble, and let them get what they deserve. Let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and let their backs be bent forever.”

Did God's people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. ***But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves.*** Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God's offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it.

Remember a key principle which I have taught you about God is that He never forces anyone to choose Him. Rather, He presents Himself to us over and over again hoping that we would in turn choose Him. So Paul explains to us that through God's methodology of choosing to go to the Gentiles, He intends to provoke the Jew to jealousy. He wants them to want His free gift of salvation for themselves. And we are assured that the day will come when the Jew will once again look to God for salvation; and it will be a blessing to the whole world. Paul continues in Chapter 11 and says:

Romans 11:25-32

I want you to understand this ***mystery***, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say,

“The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem, and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness. And this is my covenant with them, that I will take away their sins.”

Many of the people of Israel are now enemies of the Good News, and this benefits you Gentiles. Yet they are still the people he loves because he chose their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For God's gifts and his call can never be withdrawn. Once, you Gentiles were rebels against God, but when the people of Israel rebelled against him, God was merciful to you instead. Now they are the rebels, and God's mercy has come to you so that they, too, will share in God's mercy. For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so he could have mercy on everyone.

They **mystery** has been revealed. We are all sinners and all absolutely dependent upon God's mercy. And, although, throughout time God has chosen different methods for making us aware of this reality, this truth has never changed. We are all desperately in need of a Savior: Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor. Every one of us needs to know for ourselves the fullness of the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ, where we become **one** with Him and **one** with each other.

Ephesians 3:6

And this is the secret plan: The Gentiles have an equal share with the Jews in all the riches inherited by God's children. Both groups have believed the Good News, and both are part of the same body and enjoy together the promise of blessings through Christ Jesus.

Therefore, because of this truth, we have no basis by which we can hold to any condescending attitude towards others just because we have been fortunate enough to have been found by God. We are to have no prejudice towards anyone based on race, religion, gender, or economic status; none!

We have all been imprisoned equally under disobedience in order that we can have the opportunity to be set free under God's mercy. Therefore, we must never be confused by God's methodology and use His means as an excuse to justify our exclusion of others. We must understand that God so loves the world that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. That is to be our message and that is to govern how we live.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to be digging deeper into this face of God's expansive love and explore how this truth will be expressed in our lives as we address issues of our own prejudice. Every one of us has them and they impact how we deal with other people. Some of our prejudices are based on race, nationality, religion, gender, intelligence, sexuality, appearances, physical capabilities and talents, the measure of wealth a person has, and so on. And when we respond on the basis of this prejudice, we misrepresent the heart of God.

So we are going to look at how Jesus lived (He is always our example) and how He dealt with the cultural prejudices of His day. We are going to use His life and His choices as a way to challenge what is rooted deep within our Old Man, so we can see clearly to choose to believe the truth: we all stand on equal footing at the cross and we are all daily in desperate need of our Savior.

Let's pray.



Without Prejudice - 4b

Last week we began our study on a new face of God's Agape love and that is that His love goes out to the world without prejudice. It does not matter what race you are, what color you are, what gender you are, or where you fall on the economic ladder, God loves you and wants to be in relationship with you.

We also focused on the fact that it is easy to get confused by the various methods through which God has communicated His love to the world and start to believe that God's love favors one group or another. We must not confuse method with motive as that kind of thinking is entirely wrong. God sent His only Son in the likeness of man in order that He might become the perfect sacrifice and thereby remove the sins of the world.

Have you ever thought about that truth: Christ died for the sins of the world? We quote John 3:16 all the time. But have you ever really thought of the philosophical, spiritual, and practical ramifications of that concept. If what John 3:16 is saying is true and not just hyperbole, then that means that Jesus died for everyone and His atonement of grace is for all men, not just believers. And if that is true, then our perspective and our attitude toward those who are outside of the faith and who belong to different religions, even those who hate Christianity, or towards those that hold to no religion at all, must fall in alignment with God's unfathomable mercy and grace.

It is easy to be judgmental, critical, harsh, and even condemning of other people that are hostile to Jesus or to those who reject even the idea that God might be real and consider such belief as unenlightened. It is so easy to take their rejection of God personally and, in turn, categorize and label people and treat them as if they are enemies who are outside of God's mercy and are just heathens condemned to die.

Oh sure, we may from time to time feel some need or responsibility to witness and do our Christian deed of evangelizing the world, but I think we must ask ourselves, do we really love others in the same way that Jesus loves them? Deep inside, do we really care that they live separated from a relationship with God? Or do we think that they are in some ways getting their just due?

If our attitudes, our interactions, and our choices do not align up with the passion and love that God has for all the people in this world, then we are the ones living in error; and in that area of our life we are not living according to our new life in the Spirit.

These prejudicial and judgmental traps are easy to fall into and I believe the enemy is always there feeding our flesh with such thoughts. This way of thinking, however, is extremely dangerous not only on an individual level but also for our collective influence on society at large.

Let me give you an extreme example from the annals of Christianity. In the History of Christian Missions, by Stephen Neill, he states that back in the middle-ages, when Christianity was spreading through the world, those in church leadership thought that Muslims were simply unbelievers, who had no right to existence, with whom no faith need be kept, and who might be slaughtered without ruth or pity to the glory of God. In fact, a majority of Christianity seemed to hold the view that nothing could be done with the infidels except to exterminate them.

Here was the prevailing thought: as unbelievers they were destined for hell anyway; and if they were allowed to live, this could only be because of the services that they might be able to render to faithful Christians; in other words, they can live if they serve as slaves to "true believers."

What a horrible and tragic violation against the Spirit of God. These believers turned their faith inward and not outward; and thereby violated the very collective mission to which we have all been called.

2 Corinthians 5:20 and Matthew 28:19-20 are more than clear in their instruction to us. We have been appointed as God's ambassadors to make disciples of all the nations—to teach them to observe all of His ways. So here is the warning, if we turn our faith inward and focus our lives within Christianity on our church, our group, and what is important to us, which is just a "me-monster" cloaked in the draping of Christianity, then we risk becoming vulnerable to prejudicial thoughts and beliefs, even extreme prejudicial thoughts and

beliefs. And like those in the middle-ages, we will use Christian words and ideas to justify and oppress other people whom God may want for Himself.

Now, before you start thinking that my example was ridiculous and we have grown far beyond the errors of the middle-ages, just look at what we see in our own time, in our own land. For example, although most pro-life activist groups condemn violence, those who have rocked the abortion debate with murders, death threats, kidnappings, assault, battery, and the destruction of property have been identified as radical Christians who use the Bible to justify their actions.

And there is the overwhelming emotional violence that is expressed towards homosexuals by a huge segment of the Christian community. For example, I took this next quote from the first website that came up when I searched Christianity and Homosexuality. It comes from a Christian Bible College and Seminary and I lifted the quote exactly as it was presented:

Homosexuals, sodomites, or any other name you chose to call them by, are not gay (which means happy), talented, special, or even gifted. What homosexuals and homosexuality are, is an evil abomination in the eyes of God, a blemish of the face of God's creation. Many churches and many Christians and believers in God have gotten lazy and relaxed in taking a stand for what is right and what is of God. Because of this, homosexuality is running rampant in an ever-increasing number. Well enough is enough. It is time to take a stand and stand up for what is right. Homosexuality is a SIN. Standing up and speaking against this vile evil does not make you homophobic as the homosexuals would have you believe. Homophobia is a fear of homosexuals. As children of the one and only eternal and loving true God, we have nothing to fear from these sinners. In fact, it is they who are afraid of us. They are afraid of us because we stand up against them and proclaim homosexuality for what it is, a VILE AND EVIL SIN. The time has come to make a choice. Are you on the side of those who are committing an abomination in the eyes of God or are you on God's side, the side of truth and righteousness?

I am sorry, but this is sick and twisted; this is a perfect example of how within Christianity there are those who have turned inward and have forgotten that Jesus died for the sins of the world. They have forgotten that Jesus loves everyone with such an intense passion that He has asked us to go and make disciples of all peoples. They have forgotten that the reason that Jesus gives us new life (and when we become believers He creates within us a new aspect to our being which we call the **New Creation**, where He lives in us) is because He can have no part of the corruptness of our flesh. They have forgotten or do not really understand that everything within us that does not originate from God, directly from the divine through the **New Creation**, is sin and stands in opposition to God.

Therefore, with this truth of the absolute depravity of all mankind that levels the playing field between us all, who are we to categorize one sin above another? Who are we to look down on people and treat them with such disdain and hostility? I can tell you who we are; we are those who have forgotten that absent the grace and mercy of God, we would likewise be in bondage to sin and death.

And, by the way, all sin, no matter how small and trivial or how grievous, is **VILE** and **EVIL**; and that is why Jesus had to die for all of mankind because we are all guilty of sin. And as Christians, we have not been called to go and disparage people and marginalize them such that their only view of God is our hate, our prejudice, and our self-love. Rather, we have been called to make disciples of all nations.

Don't be fooled, making disciples is not about degrading people and trying to guilt them into the kingdom of God. It is not even about the kind of mass evangelism we have become accustomed to where a Christian never really has to get dirty and messy with anyone's life.

Rather, a disciple is someone who becomes like his master. That is why, historically, a disciple would leave their family, leave their school, their jobs, leave it all behind, and follow their teacher everywhere he went. The full time job of a disciple was to learn all there was to learn from their teacher until they became just like him in all their ways. That is what we are supposed to be doing if we were fulfilling Jesus' commands.

We are supposed to be the instrument, the teacher so to speak, that shows others how to be like Jesus. Jesus is to so invade our being through the **New Creation** that when others learn from us they are in reality learning from Jesus who lives His life in and through us.

And just like Jesus with Peter, James, and John, this requires relationship, it requires friendship, it requires investment of time and energy, and it requires above all an understanding of the love of the Father

for all of mankind. For it is only then that we can accurately represent His heart, His love, and His ways for someone else to follow.

Personally, I wrestle with this stuff all the time and if you dig deep, I bet you will find areas where you also have a hard time seeing others through the filter of God's love. For example, I am very patriotic and protective over our nation and against those who believe that all infidels to their faith must be killed. And although my reaction is proper and legitimate, after all it is right to protect our great nation and our people, what I find is that within me I often lose perspective.

In my sinful nature, I begin to broad-brush my feelings towards those radical extremists and my disdain for their behavior and it affects my desire to even befriend Muslims in our country who may have no connection or desire to be connected to the violence of the radical extremes of their religion. And in so doing, I am illegitimately and inappropriately cutting off my availability to be used by God. I am forgetting that He wants His love to be declared to all peoples regardless of national heritage, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other "classification" in which we try and shove people. And in those times, my emotions, my attitudes, and my words **do not** reflect the heart of God.

If we consider ourselves to be a disciple of Christ, then our heart, our attitude, and our love towards others must reflect His heart, His attitude, and His love. And if it does not, we need to, by faith, align our thoughts, our emotions, and our choices with His Word and let His truth penetrate every fiber of our being until His love for others becomes our love.

I want to establish for you the Biblical background for the truth that Christ died for the sins of all men and not just those of us who have been fortunate to find ourselves in a relationship with Christ. Therefore, we are going to examine a number of scriptures beyond just **John 3:16** to emphasize this point.

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.

John 1:28-30

These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

1 Timothy 4:7-10

Do not waste time arguing over godless ideas and old wives' tales. Instead, train yourself to be godly. "Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come." This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it. This is why we work hard and continue to struggle, for our hope is in the living God, who is the Savior of all people and particularly of all believers.

1 Timothy 2:5-7

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

1 John 2:1-2

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

1 John 4:14

Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

Now let me capture for you the story behind these verses. When God created man, he had perfect fellowship with God. We are told in Genesis that God walked in the garden and Adam was able to freely fellowship with God. But when Adam sinned, he was banished from the presence of God, both literally and spiritually. And according to Romans 6:23, the penalty for this transgression was death: both literally and spiritually. Literally in that man would now physically die but also spiritually in that man would be eternally separated from God under terrible judgment and eternal punishment.

Sin became the very barrier that would separate man from God not only in temporal fellowship, but in eternal fellowship. And since all men have sinned and all have fell short of God's standard of perfection, all of mankind was bound under this terrible judgment of sin and death.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10

And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power.

So by one man's sin, the world became infected with a terminal condition; but, as we know, God loves us so much and He so wanted mankind to be in relationship with Him, that He provided a way to remove that separation which sin caused. He provided a way so that we could once again have the opportunity to be in right relationship with God.

That is where Jesus and His work on the cross come in. Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. In other words, by His death and the shedding of His blood, which was untainted by sin, God removed the curse of sin and death that hung over all of mankind.

According to 2 Corinthians 5:21 Jesus, the only sinless man who ever lived, became sin on our behalf. He literally interceded for us and took on Himself every sin that has or ever will be done by anyone who has ever lived or ever will live. As a result, God poured out, on His one and only Son, the full measure of wrath and punishment that we deserved, for all but one sin.

Romans 3:25

For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us.

Imagine, the Father poured out His judgment for the sins of man on Jesus at the cross and separated Himself from His Son until there was complete satisfaction for all the crimes of humanity. Looking at it another way, all of mankind was sold into bondage and our master was sin and death. But the Father paid the price of His Son's blood in order to redeem us or to repurchase us from this cruel master. And the debt to sin and death was: **Paid In Full!**

Romans 5:18

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

Now I want to draw you back to this idea of being a disciple and our collective mission. If Jesus loved the world so much that He was willing to take upon Himself all the sins of every man, woman, and child, then how can we who claim to identify our lives with His, ever hold to any form of prejudice and hostility towards others such that we consider them to be outside of the grace and mercy of God? We can't! And if we do, we are not in alignment with the heart of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, a fundamental pillar of truth that is to be firmly affixed on the foundation of Christ in our lives is that we are to make disciples of the nations—of all people groups, without exception.

Now I think it is important that I clarify for you what all these scriptures are not saying. Although Christ died for everyone, not everyone is automatically saved or will be saved; and not everyone is made right with God. There is only one way to be right with God and that is by faith.

Yes, sin has been atoned for and it no longer stands as this impenetrable obstacle that separates man from God, but there is one obstacle that Jesus did not remove and that is a person's choice. God has made Himself available to everyone and He offers His salvation to all of mankind as a free gift; but each person has to decide to accept that free gift for themselves. No one can force a person to take this gift; they have to be willing to accept it and receive it into their life. This is done through belief in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:22-24; 4:16

We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in His gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. ... So that's why faith is the key! God's promise is given to us as free gift. And we are certain to receive it, whether or not we follow Jewish customs, if we have faith like Abraham's.

Romans 10:9-13

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

By the way, if you remember I said that Jesus died for all but one sin, and that is the unpardonable sin of unbelief in the work of the Spirit of God through Jesus Christ. As we discussed last week, God has revealed Himself to all mankind through His creation, through man's conscience, through the existence and presence of the nation of Israel, and through His Word such that no one has an excuse. Further, 1 Timothy 3:16 says that: "Christ appeared in the flesh and was shown to be righteous by the Spirit." Therefore, when a person becomes aware of God and closes off his or her heart and rejects the very witness of the Spirit of God, they are in effect blaspheming the Holy Spirit: taking a work that is obviously of the Spirit and treating it as if it is not of God.

Matthew 12:31 tells us that this is a sin that is never to be forgiven; therefore, all those who blaspheme the Spirit of God will die in their sin. The good news is that this sin is determined from the time of death; therefore, while a person lives it is never too late to believe and receive the free gift of a right relationship with God. However, if they reject that gift and die having chosen unbelief, they are eternally doomed.

I know this is uncomfortable to talk about, but it is a Biblical and a spiritual reality! It is horrific to think that

so many people will spend eternity separated from God in judgment and wrath. That is why we have been chosen to show the love, mercy, grace, and compassion of God to all peoples, regardless of race, religion, gender, wealth, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and so on.

There was no limitation to the work that Jesus did on the cross; and, therefore, there is no limitation to the work that Christ wants to do in us and through us in reaching out and investing in the lives of those for whom He died. That is why God's love in and through us is to be entirely without prejudice.

I would like to mention a few practical things about this idea of "prejudice" and clarify what I am **not** saying and what I do not think the scriptures say. Every culture, every race, every sub-culture, has their own unique identity and things by which others define them; characteristics or behaviors that are so endemic to that people group that it is almost one in the same. Sometimes we act like acknowledging those differences, whether we like them or don't like them, is equivalent to prejudice. But I do not believe that is the case.

The Bible does not require us to like everyone's culture, traditions, or ways of life; it just calls us to be willing to love everyone with the love of Christ. This truth gives us so much room to be ourselves and not be forced into some strange and unnatural cultural notion of uniformity under the guise of tolerance.

Jesus was uniquely Jewish and He made a point of it. He grew up Jewish and lived a fully Jewish life. Paul also was very beholden to His Jewish heritage, and even though he was called to spread the gospel to the Gentile nations, he always showed fondness to fellow Jews. In fact, we know that Paul always found a synagogue wherever he went and tried first to establish a relationship with the local Jews. And at the close of his letter to the Colossians, he makes a specific reference to a few of the guys with him as being the only Jewish Christians among his co-workers. He called them out. He did not call out anyone of any other race. And although we are told that Paul adopted the ways and customs of the Gentiles to whom He ministered, so there would be no hindrance to his ability to reach those people, we know that he loved the Jews. Just read the book of Romans; there is no doubt Paul loved his Jewish heritage and the culture that he came from.

So being identified with the unique culture and background from whence we came is wonderful and it adds to the uniqueness of the body of Christ. We are **one** because of Christ, but we are all different with different likes, different tastes, different preferences, different habits, and so on. Therefore, it is ok if we like the way we do things and don't personally care for the way others do things in their own culture. That is not prejudice that is just cultural reality.

With that said, we must never forget that the overriding principle in our relationships is that we are to be others centered: not merely looking out for our own personal interests but also the interest of others (Philippians 2:4). Therefore, we are never to let our likes and our dislikes be something that causes a hindrance in our fellowship or our willingness to invest in the life of another. Like Jesus, we are to have a life free of prejudice where we are free to love all those to whom God sends us for no one is unclean and no one is undeserving.

The book of **Acts** gives us two stories that drive this point home. Before his conversion, Paul was a religious enemy of all believers. He was so zealous for Judaism that he went from town to town persecuting, imprisoning, and even killing believers. Everyone was afraid of Paul. In fact, when God asked Ananias, a Jewish Christian to go to Paul, he exclaimed: "I've heard terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! ... But the Lord said, Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument (Acts 9:11-19)." The point being, we are to fulfill the assignments that the Lord gives us, without prejudice, even if we are afraid. For we never know what God has planned for a person.

Then there was Peter who would have nothing to do with Gentiles. But one day God gave him this vision of all these creatures which were unclean according to the Jewish law. God told Peter to go, kill and eat. Peter refused and said that he never has eaten anything unclean. But God repeated the vision 3-times. Peter was perplexed by the meaning of the vision until shortly after some people came knocking on his door and asking him to come to the home of a man named Cornelius who was a Roman officer; an unclean Gentile. For Cornelius wanted to be taught the ways of Christ. Peter then realized the meaning of the vision and he said: "I should never think of anyone as impure...I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right (Acts 10-11)."

Acts 11:9

But the voice from heaven came again, "If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't."

"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." And if God declares that He loves all those who are in the world and that everyone is worthy of His grace and mercy, then we should never let a single thought or attitude take root in our minds that would cause us to look upon another with disdain such that we behave as if we believe they are outside of His love.

Let's pray.



Without Prejudice - 4c

Over the last couple of weeks we have been talking about the fact that God's Agape love is poured out on all of mankind without prejudice. His offer of salvation and His offer of providing us a way to be in right relationship with God is available to all who are willing to believe. As we know, if we walk in the Spirit of God through the **New Creation**, then that same Agape love will flow without prejudice from God through us to others.

Tonight, we will take a look at what that amazing un-prejudicial love will look like when it practically flows through us. We are going to look at a very familiar story, at least to most people, but despite its familiarity, please stay with me and I believe you will discover some very unfamiliar truths that lie within. We will be reading from Luke.

Luke 10:25-37

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

There is actually a lot of intrigue going on here above the obvious back and forth of this exchange. Right away you know that something is up whenever a lawyer starts to ask seemingly innocuous questions. There is just something about it that you know is not right.

Now the question he asks is quite generic, the kind of question that most every asks at some point in their life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The question seems sincere, but Jesus was able to always see the hearts of those with whom He interacted. Not only did He know that this man was trying to trick Him, that was obvious, but He also saw into the very core of this man and understood the wrong belief and unbelief that held this man captive. Jesus then starts this process of drawing it out, bringing it all to the surface, and laying it out in the open for this man to see.

I find this fascinating and representative of so many parts of our walk with God. Rarely does God just hit us square in the face with our issues and our failings; rather He leads us to the place where we can see it for ourselves. He uses people, circumstances, the Word, and so on, to bring illumination to our minds, all the while prompting us to choose to believe the truth.

This lawyer must have thought that he was pretty witty believing he could trick or trap Jesus in some error. He had no idea what he started. He did not realize that he was going to get a lesson in how ugly things

can really look in the mirror.

So Jesus asks a question in response and pushes this man deeper into himself. “What does the law of Moses say, how do you read it?” The man summarized the law as eloquently as any lawyer could. He combined the entirety of the law (613 commandments) into just two sentences: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And Love your neighbor as yourself.” This response was brilliant, it was flawless. Jesus responded “Right!” “Do this and you will live!”

Jesus did not say “know this” or “teach this” or even “follow this,” He said “do this and you will live!” This lawyer was smart enough to understand that while he was trying to set a trap, he became the prey. I believe he fully understood the implications of what Jesus just said to him: to inherit eternal life He would have to love others, all others, including pagans, heathens, gentiles, idolaters and the worse kind of sinners, the poor, the sick, and even traitors to the Jewish faith in the same way as he loves himself. A love that is practical, real, and results in tangible action of caring for others.

Jesus set this man’s heart and mind in a direction that it was not prepared to go. As a Jew, he could not easily accept this truth; it was against everything that had been ingrained into him all his life. After all, he was a Jew, one of God’s chosen ones; by definition he was better than others. He was not like those who were unclean and unacceptable in the sight of God. Besides, he was unique and special even amongst his own; he was an expert in all that was God, and even to him this requirement seemed practically and theologically impossible. Sure he could understand that Jesus might push this issue in the context of his fellow Jew, but this story was too much—over the edge.

And so he did what most of us do when we come across something in the Word of God that we really don’t like, he began to look for a way out. He thought there must be a way to narrow the application of the law; after all, it could not really mean what Jesus was implying. And if what He was saying was true, that would mean that Jesus just declared him to be unworthy, guilty of violating the law, and ineligible for eternal life.

Therefore, he wanted to find the loop hole, the rationalization that would make him exempt. So he asked: “Who is my neighbor?” He could not really challenge the first part of the summation of the law: “Love your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.” That was at the very heart of his religion and his profession. So he went for the weak spot and thought that surely there must be a more narrow definition of this word “neighbor.”

Notice that in asking for this clarification we are told that this man wanted to justify himself. In other words, he felt guilty and wanted to prove himself innocent of the charges Jesus just brought up against him. You see, this man already thought he was worthy of eternal life. Being an expert in the law, I am sure that he complied with every miniscule detail; and if he was like most experts he had a pretty inflated view of himself. I am sure that he walked around town acting as if he was one of the select few who were worthy and all else were beneath him.

That is why in his furthest imagination he could not even conceive that the law placed on him a requirement to love those who were less worthy than he was. He also knew that if he was not living the law, he was a transgressor of the law and therefore no better than anyone else.

To answer this man, Jesus told a story to draw out from this man the truth about his pride, his arrogance, his prejudice, his wrong belief, his unbelief, and his lack of love for those whom God has declared are worthy of His love.

First let’s take a look at the major players in this story. We have a Jewish man traveling between Jerusalem and Jericho. We have bandits, a Jewish priest, a Levite or a temple assistant, and a despised Samaritan. I find this so fascinating. Jesus could have told this story without drawing on racial and religious differences; but knowing what prejudice really lurked in the heart of this lawyer, Jesus was very strategic in choosing His cast of characters. Besides, as we will see, the real climax in the story is not about why the 2 men who should have helped this poor victim but just walked by, but the “what if.”

We have a Jewish man who is traveling in what is obviously dangerous territory and he gets jumped. Why is it obvious? Because Jesus specified the road he was on. Remember, when you read the Bible you cannot jump over the little details that we are given; if you search long enough and hard enough you will find their importance.

Notice, Jesus did not just say the man was on a road, but the path between Jerusalem and Jericho

which was a stretch of road that was filled with hills and caves and opened up to the desert. This terrain made it a favorite place for robbers to hide and sneak up on their victims and the desert gave them an easy escape. The name of the pass in Arabic means Accent of Blood. The church scholar Jerome believed that the name was given because of the blood that bandits repeatedly shed at this place. In fact, it is likely that the inn was strategically placed in this pass to aid travelers.

It is also significant that the victim was a Jew. If the victim was a Samaritan or a Gentile, the conversation would have pretty much died. The lawyer would not have been moved at all by this story, he would have naturally thought that the victim deserved his fate and was just judged by God as all unbelievers are judged. But the victim was a Jew and the first two people to pass by were Jews—that got his attention. This made this story all the more intriguing to the lawyer. After all, this fell within his world view of who a “neighbor” was, so he was able to track with this part of the story.

Notice that the two travelers were a Priest and a Levite. This is significant because if anyone should have stopped and helped this man it would have been them. They were the ones who had the duty, the moral obligation, so to speak; after all, they were the ones responsible for distributing the alms to the poor and being the very example of the law set into motion. But neither of them stopped.

I am sure it was for a multitude of reasons. Maybe they noticed that the man was not dead but just lying there beat up bloody and helpless. If the man was dead, they might have stopped. But since he was still alive, they must have thought that there is a good chance the bandits were still in the area and if they would have stopped they would have been risking their own lives. Surely that was more than what the law required when it said love your neighbor as yourself.

Maybe it was because like many Jews they figured this man must be a sinner and was just getting his just reward from the hand of God. Remember the story of the blind man where the disciples asked Jesus if this man’s malady was because he or his parents had sinned. This was a common mindset amongst the Jews. They had a prosperity theology and figured if you were healthy, educated, and well provided for, that you must have been doing something right in the eyes of God. This resulted in a real cultural problem where the poor, sick and lame were outcasts in this society. They had no voice and were marginalized to such an extent that they were considered next to worthless.

Maybe it was because they figured it was this guy’s fault for traveling down this road and not being careful enough. Maybe they thought he should have been traveling with others and should have done a better job of evading the bandits. But whatever the reason, it was clear they did not think his problem was their problem.

But the twist in this story is this Samaritan. This man was a sworn enemy of the Jews. You have to understand that the animosity between these two racial and religious groups was so deep that Jews would not even travel through Samaria for fear of contamination. But this Samaritan who had no obligation, no duty, and who would otherwise be glad to see a Jew die, was the only one who stopped. He risked his own life to meet the needs of this man. He cared for him in a very practical way without regard for the impact on himself.

Look at the length to which he went. He provided emotional care, he soothed his wounds and bandaged them, he provided him transportation on his own donkey, and he provided housing and financial care all at his own cost and expense. And then notice that he was even willing to go above and beyond and told the innkeeper to keep a tally and he would pay any balance due upon his return trip.

This was a shocking act and I am sure that right about at this point in the story this lawyer was absolutely befuddled. Jesus left him thinking about the impossible. This Samaritan enemy cared for one of his own—a fellow Jew—and this enemy did it in an excessive and lavish manner. He met all of his needs. Then Jesus turns to the lawyer and asks him: “which of these three was a neighbor?” The lawyer was still so stuck on himself that he could not even bring himself to say the “S” word, and all he could say was “the one who showed mercy.”

This is amazing! Through this one story Jesus was able to bring up the cultural, racial, religious, and class driven prejudice that lied deep within this man’s heart and caused this man to see what he has never been willing to see before. Jesus showed him that there is no limitation to this word “neighbor” for it captures a tangible and practical reality that has no limitations or bounds. It is excessive in its application and it meets real needs of real people who are in need regardless of race, religion, social or economic status, or any

other man based discrimination.

I want you to notice what is missing in Jesus' dialogue. If you were to sit down and read the law you would find a lot of do this and don't do that, a lot of direct commands that are to rule and control our behaviors. But unlike the Law, Jesus never uttered a command. This was not about rules and prohibitions against racism, class prejudice, religious discrimination, or even hate. Jesus was trying to reach a different place within this lawyer's heart. This lawyer was used to dealing in rules, commands, and instructions; that was his trade, his profession. Jesus wanted to reach deep inside his heart and help this man get in touch not with the letter of the Law but the spirit of the Law—the unrestrained love of God for all of mankind that undergirds and wraps itself around each and every word found in the Law of God.

Here is the “what if” – the climax of the story. Jesus chose a Jew to be the helpless victim and a Samaritan to be the rescuer because Jesus wanted this lawyer to get outside of himself and inside the story. He wanted this lawyer to consider the possibility that he could have been that Jew lying bloody and helpless on the ground. He could have been that Jew watching his neighbors, no his brothers, just walk on by and scurry along to protect their own skin.

He could have been that Jew whose only potential for life would come from this despised and unclean enemy one who had no moral, cultural, social, legal, or religious reason to help him. In fact, an enemy who had every reason to run his donkey over his body a few times to finish the job the bandits left undone. Jesus wanted this lawyer to consider what it would be like to be so dependent upon the grace and mercy of someone else that he would never again try and limit what it means to truly be a “neighbor”.

Jesus point was abundantly clear; this is how God loves us! None of us deserve his love, we have all sinned and have fell short of His standard of perfection. In fact, Romans 8:7 tells us that in our flesh we are enemies of God and always hostile to His ways. And Galatians 5:17 says that in our flesh we stand in opposition to the desires of the Spirit and only love to do what is evil.

Do you understand? We only deserve rejection! We are that Jew on the road and our only help comes from one we have considered to be our enemy. The primary message in this story is that it is only when you place yourself in that position of the Jew in the road, who is completely and utterly dependent upon the mercy and grace of an enemy, will you ever learn to view your neighbors without hostility, without discrimination, without judgment, without regard to race, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, social status, or economic status.

Jesus' instruction is not about a rule, it is not about a law, it is not about a commandment; it is about a love that must be experienced. For only when you become a recipient of that undeserved love will you be able to return the favor, so to speak, and love your “neighbor” as you love yourself.

This story completely turned over this man's world view and in the same way it should send shock waves into your being. Have you ever considered the question about who is your neighbor? Have you put limitations on the who, what, where, when and why, in the same manner as this lawyer? Is your love prejudicially applied only to those that fit your criteria? Let's examine these limitations.

The Who: we are all very comfortable befriending and even helping those who are like us and with whom we find a natural connection. That just seems to make sense. However, we naturally look at those who are from a different race, a different culture (especially one that we cannot relate to at all), a different religion, a different economic status, those with different political affiliations, and those who have a different moral bent, and we scurry along. We don't want to stop, we don't want to help, and metaphorically we clutch our pockets, are sure not to look anyone in the eye, and speed on by. But it is clear in this story that no one is off limits and no one is outside of our circle of care.

The What: what we find from this story is that the “what” was all inclusive. A non-prejudicial expression of love looks at the entirety of a person's need and meets that need. So often, when we do give help someone, we provide assistance in the ways that we want to based on what we determine the person really needs, which is often biased by the “when” which we will discuss in a moment. But even though we artificially limit the “what” and we ignore the full breadth of the need, we still have the nerve to cop an attitude believing that this person should just be thankful for any help that we give them. This reminds me of that scripture in James:

James 2:14-17

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

The Where: often we only give help when it is convenient and safe for us; but not very many of us go to the places where real needy people live. Unlike the Samaritan who risked his own life, we don't want to risk our own skin. But more than that, we don't even want to be inconvenienced. We don't like to get dirty in the lives of others; we like what I call "clean" and "comfortable" giving.

The When: We generally don't have a problem giving to our favorite charity or cause. But when we see someone in our family, our circle of friends, associates or acquaintances, who is needy, we tend to first go down the line of thinking that the person has not been responsible (at least not like we have been). We believe they have not managed their lives in the way we think they should.

Therefore, we expect them to dig themselves out of their own problems. We do not think it is our job to help since the whole reason they are in this desperate situation in the first place is because of the choices they have made. Thus, we tend to lecture them about their responsibilities and then we tell them that we will pray for them. But we don't even give much regard for the possibility that God has placed this person in need—and in our way—to give us an opportunity to be the blessing and to be the very hand of God in their life.

We don't give much thought to the fact that maybe God wanted to give us an opportunity to store up treasures in heaven. We don't give much thought to the fact that everything we have comes from God, and if He wanted to lift His finger of protection over our lives it would all be blown away like dust in the wind. And it would not matter how responsible you are, how educated you are, how you manage your finances, or how careful and reasoned you are with your choices. It would not even matter how incredible your work ethic is; nothing would matter.

Our misplaced arrogance and pride is ridiculous. Our inability to be aware of our true condition, our absolute dependence upon God, is sad. We really believe that we are ok because of our merit and our diligence and we apply this world view to all others in our life thereby limiting the love we show to our "neighbor."

The Why: when we do help others, often the true motivation in our hearts is one of guilt, duty, responsibility, or even self-exaltation and we give as a way to make us feel better about ourselves. But all of these fall short of the "why" that Jesus wants us to grasp. Spiritually, we are that person lying helpless on the road and yet Jesus saved us. Practically, we could be that very person lying on the road in a bloody mess embarrassingly dependent upon someone else for help.

Jesus wants us to stop acting like the lawyer and stop finding logical and practical ways to redefine the word "neighbor" to fit our who, what, where, when and why. If you think about it, and are truly honest, all our prejudicial expressions of love are rooted in arrogance, selfishness, and a misplaced sense of personal merit. They are not imbedded in humility! They are not imbedded in the reality that any of us could be that person in need.

Just think about it for a moment, what if you were born in another country and tied to another religion? What if that was all you knew? What if you were of another race? What if you were a minority and your culture was so different and did not fit in the group of people you associate with? What if you found yourself unable to get a job and no matter how hard you try the doors just do not open?

What if you get some weird disability that just can't be explained? What if you were physically undesirable? What if you struggled with your sexual orientation and were unable to reconcile it with you faith? What if you were impoverished and in debt and had no means to fix your damaged circumstances? What if life just threw you so many wrenches you had no ability to catch them all?

Would you help you? Would you be willing love in such a way that you would meet the needs of you? Would you just walk on by judging and criticizing? Would you just do something to appease your conscience? Would you just offer up your prayers in support?

For years I was stuck in this way of thinking. I really thought that if someone just worked hard and applied themselves they would be ok; after all this is America. They could get educated if they wanted to and they could get a job if they wanted to; all they needed was a little self respect.

Honestly, I could not even contemplate the possibility that my smarts, my education, my work ethic, or my health could fail me. And unfortunately there were many people that I walked by errantly thinking that they were the ones who needed to get their act together and they just needed to make better choices. But I was the one who was in dire straits. I was the one who was truly sick and needy.

My love was constrained by my logic, my reason, my arrogance, my selfishness and my pride. It saddens me to even think about it. God had so lavishly poured out His Agape love into my life and instead of having it flow through me like a torrent of living water, so many times I just let it drip on those who fit my who, what, where, when, and why.

Each of us must come to grips with this truth: everything and I mean everything that we have is a gift from God. Sure, from what we can see and understand, any measure of personal success has a lot to do with our own merit, talent, and capability; but do not be fooled, in reality it all comes from God.

James 1:16-18

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

Therefore, if we are going to be men and women who walk in the Spirit of God, if we are going to walk by faith, we must align our view of ourselves and our view of others with this truth. We must believe that spiritually we were that person lying helpless on the road, and Jesus stopped and literally saved our life. We must believe that practically we could be that person lying on the road if Jesus so much as lifts His finger of protection from our life. Both of these truths should cause us to reset and look at our "neighbor" with different eyes.

As recipients of a love that has no prejudice, that has no limitations, and knows no bounds, we are in turn to let that love flow from us as a torrent of living water to others. And God's Agape love expressed through our lives is to be practical and holistic given the situation at hand. We are to meet the needs of our "neighbors" regardless of who, what, where, when, and why.

Yes, we need the wisdom of God in all things and we need to be sure that we are walking in His will and fulfilling the assignments He has given to us. But let me assure you, if you align your heart, your mind, and your emotions with these truths, God will speak to you and He will lead you and you will know when and where you are to lavish His love, without prejudice, on those in need fulfilling their spiritual, emotional, psychological, physical, financial, and other practical needs. This is the Agape love of God; go and do the same.

Let's pray.



Without Prejudice - 4d

We are in Part 4 of our study on the Faces of Love. We have been focusing on how God's Agape love is poured out on mankind without prejudice; and, therefore, by design is to flow from God through us to others similarly without prejudice. Let's take another look at the first part of the passage in Luke that we studied last week.

Luke 10:25-28

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live.

Last week we studied how when expressed through us, God's Agape love is extremely practical and purposes to meet the real needs of real people; hence, the instruction to love your neighbor as yourself. And who is our neighbor? That is a great question. According to the rest of this passage in Luke where Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan, our neighbor is anyone who is in need; even those we would normally walk past without much thought. And the reason the definition of neighbor is so broad is because each of us were exactly like that Jew in the story of the good Samaritan, lying on the road all beat up and bloody hopelessly dependent upon another for help.

Romans 5:6-8

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

It's hard to imagine, but we did nothing at all to earn God's favor. We were still sinners when He decided to pour out His love into our lives. This truth must sink into the depth of our beings. Our place with God has nothing to do with us and everything to do with His amazing love. And if Jesus showed us this kind of undeserving grace, then we are to in turn show that kind of undeserving love and mercy to others, without limitation and without restraint. Freely we have received and freely we are to give. But so often our own prejudice, our own judgment, our own wisdom, and our own needs cause us to limit the free flow of God's Agape love in and through our lives.

Let's consider for a moment the idea of prejudice. In our society, that word has been thrown around so often that I am afraid some of you might have that word attached to specific content or a particular scenario such that you might miss out on how it plays a stronger role in your life than you would otherwise like to admit.

Prejudice is essentially a bias, some partiality that prevents you from objective consideration of an issue, a situation, or a person, and so on. It is essentially that instantaneous process you go through where you pre-judge based on the way something or someone looks or acts, who is involved, or even just your perception of what is happening based on the limited information to which you have access.

Prejudice is essentially created from the personal filters through which you pass all things. For example, when God brings someone into your life, or has someone in your life, whom you know is in great need, do you go through your litany of rational as to why you are not really the one who is supposed to help? Do you have your own set of pre-determined notions about who you think is worthy, what you think they really need or what you think you can give, where you will go to give it (meaning what level of inconvenience to which

you are willing to succumb), when you think, in your own wisdom, that someone is truly deserving of help verses just needing to be accountable for the choices they have made in their life; and, of course, why you should be the one to help in the first place verses someone else.

I want you to understand that although these personal filters are quite natural, they are from our flesh and they are not from the Spirit of God. And when you choose to deal with people on this basis, you are not objectively looking at the situation in the way that God looks at the situation, which is through the reality of His grace in your life. This means that any judgments or decisions that you make which are not founded on the fact that you are a recipient of undeserving love are a result of your personal prejudice and therefore not in alignment with the will of God.

God expects us, as recipients of His amazing love, to be willing to give that love away, practically, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, even to those who might not really deserve it. And when you set aside your personal filters and love in this manner, you fulfill the very commandment of God. Let's turn to Matthew 10 and examine the passage where Jesus sent His disciples on their first missionary journey.

Matthew 10:5-8

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.

Notice first of all that they were instructed to stay within the limitations of their assignment. In their zeal they were not to go out and do more than the Father had appointed for them. In time they would be able to go out to the Gentiles and even the ends of the earth, but for now, the Father's will was that they bring the gospel message to their fellow Jews. They were to let them know that the supernatural power and authority of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, had invaded the natural realm of man so they had better pay attention for the kingdom had arrived. And beyond the message, they were to go and meet both the physical and spiritual needs of those to whom they were sent.

They were to heal the sick—those who had physical, emotional, and psychological afflictions. Although the physical healings would be quick, it is more likely that the other afflictions would take time, attention and care for there to be lasting healing. This would require a significant investment of their person into the lives of others for this kind of healing comes through relationship.

They were to raise the dead, those who were literally dead, but also those who were dead in their sins, including those who had so hardened their heart towards God that they even hated the idea of God. They were to go to people who had no chance at a right relationship with God absent the power of Jesus' undeserving and unprejudiced love raising them to new life.

The disciples were to be the instruments through which resurrection would take place: life from the dead. This was to be dramatic, miraculous, and undeniable as the breath of God would flow from these mere humans into the lungs and the souls of those who had no life.

They were to cleanse the lepers and literally touch those who were not only considered untouchable but whose disease was believed to be contagious and extremely gross. You have to understand how this instruction would have hit the disciples; it would not have fit into any of their personal filters. These people were extremely contagious and that is why they were the outcasts of society; no one ever touched them because no one wanted this disease. But that did not matter to Jesus, freely the disciples had received and freely they were to give.

They were to not only wash their open sores but also wash the pain and the hurt caused by those who have judged and exiled them because of something they could not control. They were to bring the comfort of touch and gentleness into these people's lives. Yes, the disciples were to get dirty and even risk infection in order to bring the message of God's all inclusive love to those who were considered by all others to be outside of the normal circle of care.

They were to also cast out demons and free those who had been spiritually oppressed and who were living with the devil's death grip wrapped around their lives. Sometimes this oppression was in the form of actual demonic possession, but it was also in the form of addictions and abuse (sexual and substance). People who are under this kind demonic influence are scary and normally we would want nothing to do with them; and we definitely would not want them around our families and our friends. These were bad people in the truest sense of the word, but Jesus wanted them to be free and He wanted the devil to be cast down.

If you think about it, practically, rationally, emotionally none of this makes sense. Jesus was asking for the ridiculous. Sure, from time to time we may muster up our spiritual conscience and go out of our way to give someone some money, or help them through a difficult circumstance, tell them about the Lord, and so on. And when we do, we walk away feeling pretty good about ourselves. But that is not how Jesus sent out His disciples.

I believe that Jesus wants to use us to make a significant impact in the lives of those who have no hope, have no resources, have no help, have no comfort and care, and who are desperate in some area of their life. This is to be the normal state of our existence when, by the Spirit, we follow the instruction of the Lord and fulfill the assignments that the Father has established for us.

Let's go back to Luke 10:27 (which is a quote from the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). I want you to consider something that you might not otherwise see. Instead of looking at this verse as having two separate commands, I want you to consider that the first part is a command and the second part is a result or a reality. In other words, if you love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, then you will love your neighbor as yourself. That will be the natural result of your submission to God. And the love that flows from your life will be nothing short of supernatural and demonstrative for all to see.

1 John 4:12

But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us.

When we love each other without prejudice and without artificial limitation, it is the very evidence that God lives in us and has invaded our being to such an extent that His love is brought to a full expression in and through our lives. Galatians 5 pretty much captures the same idea and tells us that if we follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every area of our life, that He (the Holy Spirit) will produce in us His love.

However, don't be mistaken, you will only experience this reality when you set aside your wrong belief – your prejudices – and actively believe the truth. For example, if you believe that no one is outside of your circle of care and there is no limitation on what that care looks like or the magnitude of care that you give, then you will, as the Spirit leads, choose to meet the needs of those God has brought into your life for there will be no internal conflict between your beliefs and the choices before you. Your personal filters will be out of the way and will not hinder your action.

The inverse, however, is also true. If you are controlled by your prejudice, it means you have not chosen to believe the truth and your old man, or your fleshly nature, is still in control of your life. As a result, you have limited the full expression of God's love in your life.

Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength means, by definition, that you are willing to set aside your views, your judgments, your wisdom, your rational and exchange them for God's views, God's judgments, God's wisdom, and His rational; and make choices accordingly. This is the only way to experience all of God and have a full expression of His love in and through your life. Yes, this also means that you must set aside your emotions about a situation or about a person regardless of past experiences, and instead listen only to the counsel and instruction of the Lord.

Do you know that this is exactly how Jesus lived every moment of every day? Turn to the book of Isaiah and let's look at a passage that was written about Jesus approximately 700 years (give or take a few) before He was even alive and ministering on the earth.

Isaiah 11:1-5

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight in the fear of the Lord, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear; but with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist.

A shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. This is a reference to the family line from which the Messiah would be born. The reference to Jesse is to the Father of King David. And according to the genealogy found in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, Jesus tracks straight through this family line.

Also notice that Isaiah gives a very detailed description of how the Spirit of God would abide with Jesus: the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Remember, that although Jesus came in the form of man and was fully flesh, He was still fully God. Colossians 2:9 tells us that in Jesus the fullness of the godhead dwelt within his body. The Holy Spirit filled Him at all times; and as a result Jesus was filled with the wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and the fear of the Lord that comes only from the Spirit of God. Therefore, Jesus was able to have absolute clarity in each and every situation in which He found Himself; thus He could always act without personal bias or prejudice.

Notice, we are first told that He delighted in the fear of the Lord. Proverbs 8:13 tells us that the fear of the Lord is to hate all evil (or everything that stands in opposition to the truth), and Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 tells us that this fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge and the very beginning of all wisdom. Because Jesus was absolutely beholden to the truth and rejected all evil, everything He did was grounded in true knowledge and wisdom. That is why He never made judgments about people or situations based merely on what He saw, what He heard, or what He perceived. He knew that all of that was subject to distortion in both the message and the meaning; thus, He refused to live His life according to His own human capabilities and relied on the Spirit for all things.

John 5:30

I can do nothing on my own. I judge as God tells me. Therefore, my judgment is just, because I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will.

I think this is so amazing. Jesus, the Son of God in whom the fullness of the godhead dwelt, never relied on His own assessment of situations or people. Rather, Jesus listened only to the voice of God who told Him how to judge and how to assess each person and situation in His life. And the best part is that Jesus could then boldly claim, with absolute confidence, that His judgment is just and without bias because it came from God. Here is the point I want you to take away. In every part of His life, Jesus always only sought to do the will of the Father and did nothing absent the leading and direction of the Spirit of God. That is why His judgment was not only completely righteous it was always fair.

Do you see where I am going with this? This is how we are to live our life; this is how we are able to love without prejudice. If we follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every area of our life as we are instructed in **Galatians 5:25**, if we listen only to the voice of God, then we can also know how to assess the people and situations in our life without the interference of our personal bias and our litany of rational that justifies all that we do.

I want to tell you a little story about my Great Grandma. She was truly an amazing woman who I believe loved God with all her heart, mind, and soul. But to introduce this story, I want to read a scripture that is in line with the idea of helping others without prejudice.

Hebrews 13:2-3

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

There is an old legend in New Mexico about an angel who appeared in the form of a homeless man and who traveled around from place to place by foot. He would come to various homes to see what kind of reception he would receive. The legend goes that if you invited him to come into your home and fed him that you would never be without. Now most of the people in this region of New Mexico where this homeless looking guy seemed to show up were over the edge poor. They lived on beans and tortillas, macaroni and cheese, a little bit of meat; but nothing that any of us would consider to be plenty, abundant, or even good.

Well one morning this man who had a long white beard and an old bag on his shoulders showed up at my Great Grandma's house. He stayed out by the water pump – this was back in the old days where you had to manually pump your drinking water from a well. When she saw this man, she did not judge by appearances and refuse to let this man in because he was dirty and beggarly; she did not judge by her own poverty, but was willing to share what little she had; she did not act inconvenienced despite the early morning hour and her responsibilities around the farm, she considered only that this poor man was in need and God had brought him to her door. She invited him in, he washed his face and cleaned up and ate the macaroni and cheese that she had prepared for breakfast. Then after he ate all that she had, he just left and no one saw where he went. As the stories were passed around it was told that the night before he had appeared at a ranch that was very far away; there was no way he could have walked over night the distance from that ranch to my Great Grandma's place. And the strange thing is that after that time no matter how poor my Great Grandma was, it seemed she never was without.

I remember when I was a kid we used to go to her little home almost every Sunday and all our extended relatives would come and visit throughout the day. We were usually one of the first families to arrive and my Great Grandma would always have this pot of beans and meat on the stove. She would also have some tortillas and chili around. But the most amazing thing is that no matter how many people came over, that pot never was empty. Everyone would come and everyone would eat to their personal content, but that pot never emptied. I swear; I never once saw anyone go without.

Whether this man was an angel or not, I believe God honored my Great Grandma for her willingness to represent His love without prejudice and without bias. How many of us would have a similar reaction if a dirty homeless guy showed up at our front door. Most of us would call the police. We would judge by what we see, what we hear, and what we smell, and in so doing we might miss out on an appointment from God and a blessing from God.

Would it not be better if we were so in tune with the Spirit that we actually knew what God wanted from us at any moment of time? For example, what if your assignments to heal, resurrect, cleanse, and free others from oppression are right in this room? Now, I don't want to come across as if I am trying to manipulate you or make you feel guilty and get you to do something out of duty. I just want to emphasize the point that your life is to be lived not by your bias, not by your prejudice, and not by your comfort and convenience, but by the leading of the Holy Spirit in every part of your life.

Galatians 5:25

Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

And it all starts with the fear of the Lord – with being beholden to the truth – For when we fear the Lord, God Himself will impart to us His wisdom, knowledge and understanding which we will need in order to see with God's eyes, hear with His ears, and perceive with His insight

So how do we arrive at this place of fearing the Lord? There is only one way and that is when we dedicate ourselves to seeking the Lord with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Proverbs 2:1-11

My child, listen to what I say, and treasure my commands. Tune your ears to wisdom, and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures. Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord, and you will gain knowledge of God. For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He grants a treasure of common sense to the honest. He is a shield to those who walk with integrity. He guards the paths of the just and protects those who are faithful to him. Then you will understand what is right, just, and fair, and you will find the right way to go. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will fill you with joy. Wise choices will watch over you. Understanding will keep you safe.

This is the secret to living and loving without prejudice? This is the secret to having the supernatural wisdom, knowledge and understanding that only comes from the Spirit of God. This is the pathway to being absolutely dominated by the Spirit such that you will understand what is right, just, and fair and you will know how to find the right course of action in each and every situation you find yourself. It all flows from intimacy with God. If you seek Him as you would search for lost treasure, listen to His commands, tune your ears to wisdom, concentrate on understanding, cry out and yearn for insight and understanding, He will meet you and will disclose Himself to you. Deuteronomy 29:13 says: "You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart". This is a guarantee; He will not leave you hanging.

This is the pathway to love – the only way to love without limitation or reserve. Seek the Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and His Agape love will come to full expression in and through your life. You will be a supernatural beautiful work of the Spirit of God doing only what your Father tells you to do, loving as He loves, serving as He serves, giving as He gives, touching as He touches, healing as He heals, meeting needs as He meets the needs of others through you without prejudice.

Let's pray.



Without Prejudice - 4e

I know you can't believe that this is part "e" of a love without prejudice. Honestly, I thought we were going to move on to another face of love, but I believe God wants us to dig deeper into this idea of our personal prejudice and understand how it prevents us from loving our neighbor as ourselves and from being the instrument through which God's Agape love is poured out to others.

We must avoid the tendency to be too narrow in our definition of prejudice. If you remember last week we defined it as a bias; a partiality that prevents you from objective consideration of an issue, a situation, or a person, including how you see yourself. It is essentially a deviation from the truth. And if we deviate from the truth, we will be unable to live in truth and therefore unable to love in the truth.

Do you ever wonder about why you can read your bible, pray, go to church, serve God, and do all the things that you think you are supposed to do but still find that your life is not free in the Spirit? Do you find yourself weighed down by your experiences in this world and rarely taste of the peace, the joy, or the contentment that God said would be yours? Are so few of your relationships distinguished by God's Agape love pouring through your life? If this is your experience, it is likely that there are significant areas of your life that deviate from the truth. Let me explain.

In pretty much every sport we get our speed, power, agility, and stability from the stomach, hips, thighs, hamstring and buttocks. This is called the core and it is the center of power and the base for all movement. In fact, your core muscles must engage before you do anything else or make any other movement, whether it is turning your head or moving your shoulder, swinging a bat, throwing a ball, or running. I find it interesting that in Ephesians 6 we are instructed to "gird our loins [or our core] with truth" as a way to protect ourselves from an attack of the Devil.

In other words, the protection of our spiritual strength, agility, stability, and the center of all that allows us to do what God asks of us, comes from our willingness to live in the truth. If we do not gird ourselves in truth, we expose our stability and our power to a crippling onslaught of the enemy.

I want you to understand how important this concept is and I do not want you to downplay it as if I am making a big "to do" out of nothing. God is very purposeful in the metaphors that He chooses to communicate spiritual principles. In fact, living in truth is so critical that Jesus says that it is at the very center of our worship of God.

John 4:23-24

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Our entire relationship with God begins when we adopt as our own some very basic but critical truths. For example: God is perfect and I am not; I have sinned and fall short of God's standard of perfection; God loves me so much that He sent His only Son to die for my sins and to take the full punishment of the wrath of God in my place; Jesus, the Son of God, part of the triune Godhead, came to earth in the flesh to be the perfect sacrifice for my sins; He died and was raised again and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, and so on.

It is our belief in these truths (which includes our simultaneous rejection of all that stands in opposition to them) and our verbal confession of these truths that result in our being saved. But these are just the basics. God wants to purge every area of wrong belief from your life. He wants you to replace truth for error, belief for unbelief. In His jealous love, He wants all of Him to be in all of you. Remember, Jesus prayed:

John 17:16-21

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

Jesus' goal: our oneness with the Godhead. Jesus' motivation: His jealous love; He jealousy desires the Spirit that He has made to dwell in you (**James 4:5**) – in other words, He wants His Spirit to possess your entire being and He wants there to be nothing that stands in the way of His oneness with you. Jesus' method: sanctification in the truth.

We know His goal and we have studied His motive, so let's understand His method. What does it mean to be sanctified in the truth? I do not believe this means that since the Word is the truth, that if you study the Word you will automatically be sanctified in truth. No, many people spend a lot of time reading their Bible and are not sanctified in truth. In fact, they rarely if ever experience oneness with God, and their lives are not marked by Agape love.

Maybe the best way to communicate this concept of sanctification is to consider the antonym of this word, which is desecration. In other words, there must be vandalism, defilement, a deconstruction, a tearing down, a sifting, a threshing, and a dismantling of everything that is not truth in order for you to experience truth.

Let me paint a picture for you. If you have been born again, a foundation has been laid in your life which is Christ. The foundation is solid, it will not move; it is sure, steady and entirely reliable. The issue comes down to what you will use to build on this foundation, what kind of house you will erect. Paul tells us that we need to be very careful how we build on this foundation.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

So let's talk about the building materials described here. Paul contrasts wood, hay, and straw with gold, silver, and precious stones. Not only are the later of far greater value and worth, it would be quite a spectacle to see a house built with them – a little too costly for most of us.

However, in those days, as is today, wood was a common building material and extremely affordable. Hay and straw were abundant and cheap. They were used as key components to make brick for the house and they also provided the covering for the roof as it was laid across wood slats or branches.

But the point Paul makes is clear. Add a little bit of fire and it will quickly become evident which makes better building material. Hay, straw, and wood may be easily available and affordable, but will be instantly consumed by fire. In fact, they become the very fuel that makes the fire hotter and more destructive.

In contrast, the precious stones will be virtually untouched by the fire. As far as the gold and the silver, sure they may melt in the fire, but that process actually makes the gold and silver more valuable as the fire purges the impurities from the metal. The message is this, if you want to protect your house from being consumed by the fire, it is advisable to build with the most expensive and valuable materials that are not impacted by fire—the truth that comes from God alone!

Every one of us has built psychological and emotional structures, barriers, shelters, or houses in order

to protect ourselves from the elements, from bad people, or from any kind of danger or threat. We do this as an automatic defense mechanism to survive the wounds and the pain that have come into our lives, regardless of how small or large they may have been. This is rarely a conscious process. Rather, it happens deep within our subconscious where the hurts and tears that are caused by others tend to exist.

For some, you were exposed to harmful elements quite early because of your family situation; thus, you have been busy building your protective shelter from the get go. You don't even know what it would be like to live without your protective covering. It is all you know; it is like your skin – it is just there. You may not even be able to explain how it got there or connect to what happened in your life. But it is there nonetheless and it impacts how you relate to others. It is your security and how you protect the fragment of self-worth to which you cling.

Maybe you never went through any big drama or endured any real disruption in your life; but don't think for a moment that you have not built your walls. All of us have built our shelter of protection just to survive living in a fallen world.

For example, the person whose dad or mom left when they were young has developed all sorts of psychological and emotional mechanisms to protect themselves from further abandonment. This impacts their ability to trust others and limits their ability to be vulnerable in relationships. They would rather keep people at a safe distance to ensure that they are never hurt like that ever again. Still another person responded to that abandonment in a very different way. They are on a constant search to be validated and to be important to others. They have this need that screams for fulfillment. They search for the attention and adoration they never got from their dad or mom. Quite often this is marked by the search for sexual fulfillment and the constant in and out of relationships.

Another person responds by personal sabotage. Deep inside they are so convinced that they are going to be abandoned and rejected that they will intentionally (at the subconscious level) create problems and difficulties in their relationships so that others do the very thing they are most afraid of—walk away. They do this because in some twisted way this is actually comforting. Their world is actually in order and makes sense. They will have once again proven what they know to be true: they have no true value or worth.

The person who was subject to parents that were very controlling and emotionally suffocating often develops extreme rebellious or passive aggressive tendencies to survive the trauma. Another person will respond by becoming compliant; they become the perfect child doing it all right. They must have the pleasure and approval of others so they don't get in trouble. In this they take great pride and look down on those who cannot please nearly as good as they can. Still others become controlling themselves and take this obsession to the next degree of intensity and they cannot function unless they are in control.

The protective mechanisms that we create are vast, varied, unique, and one could probably never come up with a comprehensive list of causes or reactions. Some people fall into depressive holes; others adopt performance based obsessions where they must win, they must be the best, they must have success. Others give themselves over to failure since that is what they truly believe their destiny holds for them. They become lazy and have no initiative or drive as they strive to validate the worthlessness they have felt. Others shut down their emotions and simply won't let themselves feel, and they actually look down on others who are not as emotionally controlled as they are.

Others drape themselves with neediness and become extremely clingy. Others develop self destructive disorders that are food, substance, sex, or self-harm based. Others become angry, manipulative, selfish, self-centered, sarcastic, boisterous, loud, cruel, and even violent. And others become silent and un-engaging preferring their isolation to any risk of being hurt by another.

Still others resort to humor and maintain shallow relationships so no one never really knows the pain that exists within their heart or the inadequacy that they feel. Others become extremely passive and want nothing to do with conflict and they tend to be walked on and manipulated by others. Then there are those who just want to keep the peace and try to make sure that everything is under control in their environment. They spend all their energy trying to make sure that everyone else is ok and taken care of.

Others just live in denial of whatever circumstances they find themselves in and often create an alternate reality and convince themselves that it is real. They have a real hard time being honest and truthful about the reality of their life, their relationships, their marriage, their children, etc., and they work real hard to convince others of the image that they want them to see.

And, almost without exception, way deep inside in the recesses of our being, we all become untrusting and even angry at God. We believe that if He was doing His job, if He really loved us, if He really cared, He would have protected us from the harm, the pain, the trauma, the betrayal, the abandonment, and the violations which we endured. And since God did not do His job, it is clear in the areas of our inner-self, we have to protect ourselves!

To some extent, all of us have built with these materials. All of us have responded to the pain, disappointment, damage, rejection, isolation, abandonment, and so on by grabbing all the wood, hay, and straw that we could find in order to build our little protective house. The problem is that despite how many stories or additions we have built, it is really a fragile structure. It may seem to accomplish its protective purposes, but it is just an illusion—it is not the truth. We are not safe and we are not secure in our house of wood, hay, and straw.

In addition, we are not free; our self-image and our emotional and psychological health is held hostage to those that have hurt us. Few of us even understand what it is like to live as a **New Creation** in absolute freedom. Free from all the pain and damage that has happened in our lives, free from all the dysfunctional ways in which we have tried to protect and preserve ourselves.

Do you understand that these protective mechanisms are the very filters through which all things must pass? They create our bias—our prejudice. They cause us to not be objective in our consideration of people, relationships, situations, and so on. And since we are unable to objectively see things in the way that God sees things, we are unable to love with His Agape love.

As a result, our relationships are still centered, for the most part, on the “me” and what is in it for “me”. And if we do not perceive that there is enough in it for the “me,” like the Jews on the road to Jericho (in the story of the Good Samaritan), we just walk on by those who are desperate for a touch of God’s unprejudiced love.

Another way to look at it is that if God’s goal is our oneness with Him, then each of these emotional and psychological structures stand in between you and God. They are barriers that limit your ability to be dominated by the Spirit, to hear His voice and to know His will for your life. And not only that, they are actually idols; they have become substitutes for God and what He is to be in your life.

I also want you to understand that these mechanisms will not stand the test of fire; neither eternally nor temporally. Paul makes it clear in **1 Corinthians 3** that in eternity the wood, hay, and straw will not last—it will all be consumed by fire.

Similarly, if here and now God allows enough testing to come into your life, these protective mechanisms will absolutely be inadequate to protect you. In fact, they will actually fuel the fire and make things worse. You will suddenly find yourself in a panic when your standard protective techniques no longer work. You will not know what to do and you will either dig your heels in and try with everything in your being to keep up your façade or you will grasp for new and more dysfunctional protective mechanisms to survive. But either way it will not be pretty.

That is why God wants these weak and fragile structures torn down. He wants to level and remove all that hinders your ability to worship Him in Spirit and truth. Therefore, you must defile your idols and dismantle all the lies upon which you have tried, in your flesh, to protect yourself. I believe this is the meaning in this famous passage in Matthew.

Matthew 7:1-5

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. “For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye?” You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

Because we judge people and circumstances through the filters of our self-protective mechanisms, we judge with prejudice and bias; and, in turn, we are judged with prejudice from others. It seems to be the way of all people. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to remove the log in our own eye, to tear down and

dismantle the artificial structures of protection we have built. If we don't we will never be able to see clear enough to help someone remove the filters they have built in their own life; and we will all remain blinded and held captive to prejudice.

Note, it is also not sufficient for you to build onto your weak house additions made of precious jewels, gold and silver—the truths that come from God. It may keep you busy and look nice to others, but if these additions are attached to a faulty core structure, the entire thing is subject to collapse.

I have seen it happen over and over again where due to some trauma, like a division in the church, many people's faith just collapses and they are left in ruins not knowing even how to get up again. It is so heart breaking when this happens. Any building you do with precious jewels, gold and silver must be firmly attached to the foundation. That is the only way you will be truly protected from the things that comes against you in this world.

With a bit of sarcasm you might be thinking: "Oh sure, I am going to just take the speck out of my eye and tear down all these structures I have relied upon all my life, and in the morning everything will be ok." That's fair! I know that most of you don't even have the slightest idea how many structures you have built and you can hardly even tell that they are there unless someone points them out to you. At the most, you might be willing to admit that God's Agape love is often restrained in your life and you are predominately ruled by your bias and prejudice. And with that being the case, you can rationally conclude that you must have built an expansive protective covering but you don't even know what it looks like and you have no idea how to even start to deal with these things.

Well, I am not going to try and give you a one pill cures all type of remedy. But let me say this, the answer lies in identifying the truth, dealing with the truth, and choosing to live in the truth no matter how painful that might be. And believe me it will likely be painful and scary to step outside of your protective shell. That is why at the beginning I said that building with precious jewels, gold and silver is a little too expensive and most of us opt for the convenience of wood, hay, and straw.

Now I have no hard facts to support what I am going to say next, but based on my experiences, I believe it to be true. Every hurt, every pain, every injury, every trauma, every betrayal and act of emotional and psychological violence that has happened in your life is like an open wound that continues to fester everyday of your life until it is healed. I also believe that the intensity and breadth of the protective mechanisms that you have adopted has everything to do with how many wounds you have endured or how deep those wounds go into your being. And that is unique for each person based on their individual emotional and psychological wiring.

However, I am also convinced that time does not heal wounds. Only Jesus can truly heal your wounds and only in Him will you find deliverance. But you must clear the path. You must grant Him access. You must remove those protective barriers around your pain and let Him in or you will never walk in truth and in the freedom that God desires for you to walk.

I have found that fear is probably one of the greatest antagonists to living in the truth. Fundamentally we are afraid that God is not going to protect us – just like He didn't when we got hurt in the first place—so we would rather live in our house of wood, hay, and straw, instead of exchanging it for a house constructed with precious jewels, gold, and silver.

It all comes down to a mental, emotional, psychological and spiritual battle. On the one side there is the wrong belief and unbelief in which you have found your refuge, but which leaves you largely powerless and impotent in your walk with God. On the other side is faith: your willingness to trust God and actively believe the truth. It sure looks scary on this side, but it has also been tried and has found to be true. Besides, many good promises come with choosing this side.

Now, the battle will go to whatever side you give your time and attention. If you want to be a man or a woman of faith, then it starts with seeking the Lord with your whole heart, your mind, your soul and your strength. It starts with the desire to let Him have all of you. It starts with confession and your willingness to admit that 1) you have not trusted Him with the deep places within your heart; 2) you don't know if you can trust Him; 3) you are probably really mad and disappointed with Him; 4) you really think you could have done better with your life than He has done; and 5) regardless of 1-4 you want to learn how to trust Him.

Don't worry if you don't understand all of the protective mechanisms that you have built, don't worry if you have no idea how to dismantle them, don't be dismayed if you think you are too afraid to come out from

under their covering. Ask God and He will first show you the real fruit you are producing in your life by living in your shelter of protection; He will show you how rotten it really is. He will then show you each barrier you have built. He will even bring people into your life to speak to you and help you see all of it.

Yes, He will ask you to walk out from under your protection. That is a choice you must make; He won't force you. But if you chose to take a risk with God, He will be the one to dismantle the lies in your heart. He will so totally clean up your foundation that you will be able to start new and build with precious stones, gold and silver firmly attached to the foundation.

Proverbs 3:5-8

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.

Proverbs 4:20-22

My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to all their body.

Can you imagine true healing in those deep, deep, recesses of your being? Can you imagine there being joy and new life in your bones when all there was before was sorrow and darkness? The healing will come from His hands if you are willing to know the truth, believe the truth, and choose the truth.

Let me give you an example of the first 2-steps: knowing and believing the truth. The 3rd-step, choosing, will be obvious when you understand the first 2-steps. Let's take the issue of being afraid that God will not protect you if you step out from under your protective covering. After all, He did not protect you from the hurt that started your building process in the first place.

Well, the truth is that God never promised you would not get hurt. That is a wrong belief and an absolute lie from the Devil. In fact, God made it clear that you should expect immense opposition in this world because that is what He Himself faced.

John 15:18-22

"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you." If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also." But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.

With the knowledge of this truth, you must now be willing to turn it into belief and set aside any requirement that you have held against God to protect you from the perils of this world. You must choose to believe that if the world hated Him, it will also hate you. God only promised that He would care for you through the journey and that you would be victorious if you trust Him and not become afraid and rely on your own methods for protection. Do not lean on your own understanding and He will make your paths straight – that is a promise!

John 16:33

"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Isaiah 43:1-3

But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!” When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

This is His promise. If you let Him, He will deliver you safely through all the turmoil, trauma, and terrors of this life. Yes, life can totally stink, but He will hold you up and make you strong because of how much He loves you. That is why He says “do not fear” and instructs you to take courage. And not only that, we are told in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that He will never allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to endure, but in every circumstance, He will provide a way of escape—He will provide the out. So there is never a time where you have to choose your own ways; you can always choose to believe the truth; always!

Now with that lie dismantled, we move to the next one. God actually allows us to go through the fire of suffering because if we turn our eyes to Him, He will use the fire to destroy our faulty buildings made of wood, hay, and straw and He will teach us how trustworthy He is. And despite what it seems, the events of our lives are not random, arbitrary, or capricious; rather, all things that come into our lives are permitted by God, filtered by God, and allowed for our glory and His.

From God's perspective, there are no surprises and there are no mistakes. He is always in control and has always been in control! Even before you became a Christian this was true. Remember, He chose you before the foundations of the world to be His own (Ephesians 1:4) and He chose you to be conformed into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

The truth is that God cares more about His life being manifested in your body than He does about your temporal comfort and pleasure. He knows that it is only when He dominates your being that you will be at peace and at rest. Therefore, God is willing, in His absolute sovereignty, to allow all kinds of circumstances to come into your life (both pleasurable and painful) for the purpose of driving you to Him and conforming you to the image of Jesus. So whatever you have gone through, it was necessary to accomplish His purposes in your life. You may not like His methods, and He does not require you to, and you may not understand the “why's,” but remember the truth: His love for you is at the root of it all.

With that truth laid down, you move on to the next, and the next, and the next. You must let the reality of God's love which is found in each and every truth pour healing into your wounds. And when you reconcile what you think and what you feel to the truth, then you will be healed and you will find freedom from all that restrains you from experiencing God and being a vessel for His Agape love.

This is the pathway for loving without prejudice. This is the pathway to helping others see. This is the pathway to freedom and to life. This is the pathway to sanctification and to worshiping God in Spirit and truth.

Psalm 147:1-3; 10-11—[additions are my commentary]

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God! How delightful and how right! The Lord is rebuilding Jerusalem and bringing the exiles back to Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, binding up their wounds...The strength of a horse does not impress Him; how puny in his sight is the strength of a man. [It is like wood, hay, and straw.] Rather, the Lord's delight is in those who honor him, those who put their hope in His unfailing love.

Let's pray.

16 The Faces of Love Loving Correction - 5a

We are on a new face of love this evening: “Part 5-a Loving Correction”. But although we are moving to a new face, don’t think for a minute that we are moving too far away from the topic we discussed last week. I believe God started to do a serious work in many of your hearts and I believe He wants to continue to work through the process of bringing you true healing.

Revelation 3:19

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

This verse is an excerpt from a letter that Jesus wrote to the church at Laodicea and I think it captures a face of God’s love that is critical for you to understand and accept. God, as a loving Father, will absolutely bring reproof and correction into your life to accomplish His will: your **oneness** with the godhead.

Imagine **oneness** where there is little to no separation between Him and you. In fact, from a distance it seems as if you are one person: distinctively you yet at the same time unmistakably God.



Unfortunately, this **oneness** is rarely experienced. Each of us tends to allow so much wrong belief and unbelief into our lives which causes a separation between us and God. As a result, our fellowship is constrained and our ability to hear the voice of God and know His will is absolutely stunted. I like to illustrate this separation with this simple graphic:



This kind of existence does not lead to life and peace but it seems that for most Christians this kind of separation is all they know; it is their entire Christian experience. We must realize that any thought, motive, feeling and decision that begin with the word “My” will usually lead to an empty and powerless experience with God. Our beginning, our middle and our end is to be filled with Him: in fact the cry of our heart should be more of Him and less of me.

But we have been deceived into believing that we are actually quite capable of leading and managing our own life; hence all of the emotional and psychological structures, barriers, shelters of protection and houses that we have built with wood, hay, and straw. If you missed last week’s teaching, I encourage you to go to the website at pathwayfellowship.org and listen so you can get a full understanding of what I am talking about when I refer to these emotional and psychological structures we have built.

As we discussed last week, notwithstanding our delusion, those structures are weak, feeble and extremely vulnerable to fire; thus, if we stay hiding inside or behind them we are actually placing ourselves

at great risk. This is something that is not ok with the Father. He loves you as His precious child and He does not want you living at risk of serious damage. Like any loving Father, He naturally wants you to be safe, cared for, and secure. But He knows that you can only experience that kind of protection when your life is found in Him and there are little to no barriers that stand between you and God.

Therefore, in His love, He is willing to intentionally expose your areas of wrong belief and unbelief (which is the idea behind the words reprove or rebuke in Revelation 3:19). In bringing these areas to your attention, He wants you to change your mind, or repent, and choose to believe the truth about God and who He is and what He wants to accomplish in and through your life.

He is also willing, if necessary, to chasten you (which is the idea of training up a child or disciplining a child). If after the reproof or rebuke you continue to walk in your own ways attempting to manage and control your own life, He will bring correction. He will allow the fire to run amok and burn down the shelters and barriers you have created so that you will learn and come to believe in His love and the worthlessness of the emotional and psychological mechanisms you have developed to protect yourself.

But what I find interesting about this passage in Revelation is that He never just brings in the discipline; rather, there seems to be a gap between the reproof and the correction. He first gives you a choice; the opportunity to choose to come to Him of your own volition, follow His ways, and receive from Him His life. He loves you so much that He always gives you this choice; He always gives you an alternate pathway, an easier way out! Let's take a look at this passage in its entire context so we can get a good look at this whole process.

Revelation 3:14-22

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true

Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, " I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. **'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.** 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Can you imagine having a letter written to you by Jesus describing your true spiritual condition? To me that would be horrifying. And they had nowhere to run and no excuses to hide behind. The letter was from Jesus Himself and He says that His witness is faithful and true; it is spot on without prejudice or error. It's as if Jesus put the spot light of truth on their life so that everyone could see clearly without their blinders of deception. He says: "I know your deed." And because He is the "Amen" He is by definition the final word and when He speaks it is with all authority.

A little bit about the background of this church will be useful to understand the importance of the metaphors Jesus used. Laodicea was located in modern day turkey and was the banking and financial center of the region. It was located on the road to Ephesus in one direction and the road to Syria in the other. Thus it naturally became a center of trade between the East and the West and became extremely prosperous. In fact, it was said that there were few areas where the Jews were wealthier and more influential.

It was originally a fortress, but its Achilles heel was that it had no water source of its own and had to get water from an underground aqueduct about 6 miles away which obviously made it easy for anyone to seize the fortress – they would just cut off the water supply. So as good capitalists they decided if they could not defend against their enemies they would trade with them. Let's talk a little about their industry:

1. First they were a banking center and traded in currency. As travelers came from the East to the West, or vice versa, they would exchange their money for other currency and they always made a margin on the trade.
2. Second they were a big manufacturer of inexpensive clothing. They massed produced a cheap outer garment made from soft violet-black glossy wool that was produced from the sheep in that region.
3. Third, they had a considerable medical school and clinic, the center of which was a temple dedicated to Asclepius (He was a Greek hero who later became a god of medicine and healing). The medical school was famous for two things, ointment for the ear and ointment for the eyes. Remember I mentioned that the water supply was about 6 miles away. Well at its source there were both hot springs and cold springs. The hot springs were rich in mineral content that were believed to have healing properties. Sick people would travel from miles away to seek healing in the mineral rich hot springs outside of Laodicea. One of the most important medical treatments was for people with eye disease. The physicians of the area created an eye salve known as Phrygian powder and it was exported and marketed all over the world.

So Laodicea was kind of a Citicorp, Old Navy, and Duke Medical Center all rolled into one. With that as the background, let's get into the letter. Jesus wastes no time and He pulls no punches. He straight up tells them that despite the fact that they believe they have spiritual life and are effective in the kingdom of God, they don't and are not! They are absolutely ineffective and lifeless. He says they are neither like the hot springs that bring healing to others nor like the cold springs that cool off, refresh, and bring life; but they are merely lukewarm and blah – only to be spit out of the mouth.

Their wrong belief and unbelief has made them so indistinct and self-focused that they had become indifferent to the presence and power of God in their lives. They allowed so much to separate them from fellowship with God that we actually find Jesus standing on the outside of this church knocking on the door waiting to be let in.

That is so sad! But please don't sit too high and look in judgment on those in this church, because this is a picture of the life many of you lead. You believe that you are ok because you go to church, and for the most part you hang out with Christians not doing anything too bad or too sinful. You have found a way to be comfortable and satisfied with being a "good" Christian. Besides, you think that all this talk of hearing the voice of God, knowing His will, having intimacy with Jesus is a little too far out there and that is not really all that necessary.

However, from a perspective of true spirituality, your life is indistinct, tepid and empty; you neither bring healing or refreshment into the lives of your fellow Christians. You have assimilated yourself into your culture and have prioritized what others think of you and you have forgotten about friendship with Christ. Like those in Laodicea you are afraid that if you were to let Jesus into the midst of your shelters and homes of wood, hay, and straw He might actually disrupt your life. So with an air of indifference you leave Him on the outside.

Last week I said that if you are going to ever experience true healing, such that you become one of those friends of God who worship Him in Spirit and Truth, then you are going to have to let Him into your barriers, your shelters, and your homes so that you can experience His love and His healing at the very depths of your heart. He wants access to that place where all your hurts and pains are stored.

By the way, in the first century, sharing a meal with someone was considered to be an act of extreme intimacy, friendship, trust, and connectedness. This is the notion that Jesus is trying to communicate. He wants to you to be vulnerable and open so that He can bring you into **oneness** with Him so you can enjoy all that comes with being a friend of God. Let's read verses 17:

'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

Those in this church had a prevailing attitude of self-reliance. They were arrogant and believed that they could take care of themselves and make it on their own. They took a lot of pride in what they could

achieve. They had learned how to deal in this world, how to survive, and they were living pretty successful and accomplished lives. To give you an example, a huge earthquake hit the region and devastated city after city. Most places were so damaged they had to rely on Rome to send help and fund the rebuilding. But not Laodicea, it was rebuilt with absolutely no help from Rome – in fact, they refused funding and paid for the construction themselves. This added to this sense of pride and self sufficiency.

But look at the distinction in the words -- you say vs. you are! They measured themselves by their tangible success but had no insight, discernment, or wisdom into their true spiritual condition. They were in desperate straits and they did not even know it.

How often do you evaluate your life in exactly the same way? Many of you have experienced serious earthquakes in your lives, serious trauma, but you have found a way to survive. You have hidden yourself deep in your emotional and psychological protective shelters and you have simply gotten on with life. You are actually convinced within yourself that you are managing things ok; however, you have no idea how desperately you need Jesus. You have no idea how unstable and at risk your life really is. Sadly, Jesus looks at you and like a medical professional He gives you a true diagnosis: you are wretched, miserable and poor.

I urge you to let the light of His truth shine down into your heart. Consider how spiritually tasteless and tepid your life has really been. In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said: “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” In other words, blessed are those who realize their abject spiritual poverty and their desperate need for deep unrestrained intimate fellowship with Jesus.

Those in Laodicea were also called blind. Yes, they had their great school of medicine and they were renowned for their Phrygian ointment that brought healing to those whose eyes were infected and diseased; but none of this would help their spiritual sickness. I believe the picture that Jesus is trying to convey is one where their spiritual eyes were filled with the gunk and oozing discharge of wrong belief and unbelief such that they literally could not see through the mess.

What is really sad, however, is that they had convinced themselves that they could see, but they were completely deceived and were living in a delusion. They thought they could care for themselves, they thought they had the medicine, the knowledge, and the training, but their disgusting condition persisted.

Christ also called them naked. It did not matter how many clothes they owned or how much their clothing trade had prospered, they were standing completely exposed to the elements and everyone could see their nakedness. All it took was a little light of truth to reveal the embarrassing fact that their self protective mechanisms do nothing to protect them from the elements and do not allow them to live in peace and fellowship with God.

Personally, I find it comforting that Jesus used multiple metaphors to communicate the same basic message, which is their need to rely on Jesus for everything. I know there are times where you wonder why I stay on a topic for so long and we go from Part “a-e”. I do this because most of us have built so many barriers and so many obstacles to the truth that we usually need to be able to identify with multiple examples before we are even able to admit that we might possibly have a problem. If we, as human beings, got things the first time around and really believed them, I am sure the Bible would be a lot thinner and my teachings a lot shorter. Let’s look at verse 18:

I **advise** you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

There are two critical things to take from this verse. First, Jesus is what you really need! He is the One in whom you are to find your true identity and worth, He is your covering and protection, and He is the medicine for all your hurts. All your insecurities, all your fears and all the damage that has happened to you can be healed if you are willing to buy what Jesus has to give. All the desires of your heart will be fulfilled if you are simply willing to let Him in and give Him access to each area of pain, insecurity and fear. He will even shatter your delusions for you so that you can see clearly and are free to live in truth and worship Him in truth.

You will then realize that you have no need for those emotional and psychological shelters and barriers of wood, hay, and straw. They will become worthless to you when compared to the peace, stability, and life that He will bring into your soul.

Second, the choice is yours. He urges or advises you to buy from Him gold, white garments, and eye salve. In other words, you can choose to believe the truth that Jesus is your very provision for all that you need, and in so doing run to Him and abandon each and every barrier, shelter, house, and self protective mechanism that you have established and replace it with His truth. You can choose to believe that all your attempts to protect yourself and stave yourself from harm derive from your old life, your *Old Sinful Nature*, and your **New Creation** does not need them. Your **New Creation** lives only by faith: by actively believing the truth about God and your need for Him in every area of your life. Your **New Creation** lives by the reality of your absolute inability and His complete ability:

John 15:5:

[Jesus speaking] I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Over the last week, I have talked with many of you and I know that the Spirit of God has been very busy shining His light of truth on your life. He has shown you many areas where you are not living in truth and are hiding in your houses of wood, hay, and straw trying to protect yourself, trying to survive. I know that He has given you a glimpse of how unfulfilling and meaningless your life has been. So now is the time to seriously listen to what God is saying; let Him in, open the door! But please do not ignore what He has been showing you; take this opportunity to stop, listen, and seek.

Maybe you are not sure how to go about dealing with these areas of your life, maybe you are afraid of the disruption and the change that will ensue, and maybe you are not sure how God can even fix the mess you have made; but don't let that stop or even hinder you. Just open yourself up and ask Jesus to come and deal with all that He has shown you. He is waiting to dine with you. Remember, He made you and He knows you better than you know yourself. He will know exactly what you need and how to go about bringing healing. You just have to ask. He is not going to force Himself upon you; He wants you to want Him.

If, however, you choose to ignore Him and leave Him knocking, thinking that you have things under control, eventually He will bring discipline into your life as a way to get you to want to want Him. **After all, He has to;** His jealous love demands it! He does not want to leave you to your own devices; He is going to fight for you. But please consider Jesus admonition. This does not seem to be the choice that Jesus wants you to make; this is not the preferred route. That is why He commands you to be zealous, ardent, fervent, and even fanatical and simply repent.

This word "repent" means to reconsider your views. In other words, exchange your wrong belief and unbelief for His truth and in so doing, abandon walk away from those self-protective mechanisms that you employ. In His love, Jesus implores you to not choose the path of discipline, for it will not be pretty.

We need to move to the book of Hebrews Chapter 12 to get an explanation of God's discipline. In this passage divine discipline is likened to how a Father disciplines a child. I know that will seem familiar to many of you but understand this description only goes towards helping us understand the Father's motives and intentions, but it is His methods with which we should be wary. Remember what He told those in Laodicea: I will spit you out of my mouth or in the Greek, I will vomit you. And in **John 15:6**, He says: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned." Personally, I am extremely uncomfortable with God's method of discipline. Thank God we have a choice to be zealous and repent.

Hebrews 12:5-13

And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said,

"My child, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child."

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. Since we

respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.

So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.

The writer of Hebrews says that these were meant to be encouraging words, but painful discipline does not evoke in my mind any comfort at all. He tells us not to give up. Why would He have to say that if it was not going to be a horrible experience? I guess we are to take comfort not in the process of discipline, but in the fact that God loves us so much and so desires our **oneness** that He is willing to discipline us for our good, so that we might share in His holiness.

The end result being that we will no longer live by the lies we have told ourselves and we will no longer live through the pain of our past hurts. All of that will be burned in the fire of His discipline. Rather, we can live in peace. We can live in His love. We can live in His strength, power and might. The results of discipline are wonderful, but again, this is not the desired path. We can experience those same results by choosing to believe the truth. Look closely again at verses 12 and 13.

So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.

Do you understand what He is saying? Once again, we are being exhorted to be zealous and to repent; to make the choice to open up the door and voluntarily let Jesus in. Although we may have been living powerless and impotent lives rarely experiencing **oneness** with God, He asks us to take a new grip with our tired hands and with the remaining spiritual strength in our bodies, no longer walk as we have walked.

Instead, point your feet on the narrow pathway of faith. The implication is threefold: 1) if we walk the pathway of believing the truth about God and our desperate need for Him in all areas of our life, our strength will be renewed as we begin to experience God in all those places from which we have kept Him out; 2) if we don't choose to walk the pathway of faith and if we continue down the path we have been on, He will absolutely tear off – through discipline – the parts of our lives that are weak, lame, and dysfunctional; and 3) if we are zealous and repent, then those who follow in our path – those who are weak and lame – will themselves find a straight path to walk and they similarly will not fall.

Before you start thinking that God is mean and that you don't like any of this discipline stuff, remember that He gives you the choice to first be zealous and to repent. I encourage you to walk that path. Divine discipline is not pleasant, but it is extremely effective. One way or another God's purpose for your life will prevail. I therefore implore you to seriously consider and examine all the possible areas of emotional and psychological protective mechanisms that you have constructed over the years and ask God to not only clearly show them to you, but to come in and dismantle all of them. Then begin to seek Him and continually wash yourself in His Word. If you do, I guarantee you that He will become your very source of all that could ever need or desire.

Jesus' goal: our **oneness** with the Godhead. Jesus' motivation: **His jealous love**; Jesus' method: **sanctification** in the truth. The result: **that our joy may be made full** through a complete experience of His joy.

John 15:11

These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Let's pray.



Loving Correction - 5b

Galatians 6:1-3

Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important.

As we have studied, whatever is true of God's Agape love toward us is always intended to flow through us to others. Last week we talked about how God in His love continually knocks on the door of your heart asking you to let Him into those deep recesses where He can both dismantle the barriers of self-protection that you have erected and bring healing to the very hurt that you were trying to protect.

Jesus first brings visibility to the issues, hurts and pains that you have harbored deep within your heart. In Bible language this is called reproof. Then He begins to knock and He continues to knock and He asks you to trust Him and let Him inside your protective shell so He can do His work.

If you continue to ignore His knock, at some point He gets tired of asking and He allows correction to come into your life so you can learn how trustworthy, faithful, and loving He really is. This kind of correction has the intended impact of devastating and making useless those barriers of self-protection in which you have placed so much worth. Jesus loves you so much that He will do whatever it takes to get you to let go of those old survival mechanisms, for He knows that you will only truly be happy, safe, protected when He is the one leading and directing your life.

But the unique thing about this whole process is that you are the one who gets to make the choice to open the door and be responsive to His reproof. You are the one who gets to decide if you are going to cooperate with His correction. He will not make you choose Him, but He will do all that He can to induce you to make that choice. And God has made it clear that responding to His reproof, opening the door and letting Him in is the best choice, for correction is never pleasant although it is extremely effective.

Now, because God has made us into a family and has connected us all by His Spirit, He actually uses us to play a very critical role in bringing God's loving reproof and correction into in each other's lives. This is a very sensitive issue, however, and we need to deal with it in care so that in practice no one becomes a victim of spiritual bullying. Let me just say right from the start what scripture is not saying. In our role in bringing reproof and correction into the life of another, we are not to be God's hammer smacking down everyone who we think is sinning; not at all! Galatians 6:1 is qualified by what Paul has already communicated in ***Galatians 5***.

Galatians 5:13-15

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

We are not to kill or even wound those who are weak. We are not to take chunks out of each other. Rather, we are to serve one another through love—God's Agape love is to be both our source and our means. All that we do is to be bounded by God's Agape love. Yet, when dealing with correction it is so easy for the flesh to slip in and to commingle true spiritual issues with your own personal junk. The result being is that the person who is the object of the "correction" is left feeling slimed, hurt, confused, and damaged. That is why this passage provides us very specific limitations on who, what, when where and why we are

to step into someone's life in this capacity.

So let's venture down the 5-W's and understand how God desires to work through us in the lives of our brothers and sisters the Lord.

Who. There are actually two who's that we need to consider: who as the object of reproof and correction (Who-1) and who as the initiator of the reproof and correction (Who-2). Who-1 is very clear when we consider that this passage is dealing with our obligations to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. We are not responsible to try and fix non-believers and try and be their conscience, their parent, their lawgiver, or their judge. That is the role of the Holy Spirit and not our role. Paul therefore makes this instruction very specific in its application to believers only.

With regard to the Who-2 Paul also makes this instruction very specific in its application. In the Greek "you who are godly" literally means: you who are "spiritual." This is not to be understood in the general sense of someone who is interested in spiritual things; and, in this application, it is not a euphemism for a believer (although a believer, even one who is living in the flesh, is considered to be spiritual).

Rather, it refers to someone whose knowledge and actions are derived from the Spirit; it is someone whose life is dominated by the Spirit of God such that they have the knowledge and wisdom of God to deal in these kinds of matters. It is a person who has according to Matthew 7:5 has taken the log of their own eye so that they can see clearly to help others extract the splinter in their eyes. This is important, because if you do not walk in the Spirit of God then you are not in the position to be God's instrument of reproof and correction.

Keep in mind, the fact that a person may hold a title, a degree, or a position of leadership in a church or ministry does not by definition qualify them to be a Who-2. I can tell you story after story of people who have been victims of so called spiritual reproof and correction by those who claim some authority over their lives merely because of position and title. The result was always horrific and tragic.

Who-2 must be someone whose life is dominated by the Spirit of God and who bears the evidence of such domination. Their personal resume should look as follows:

Galatians 5:22-23

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Here there is no conflict with the law.

What. We are dealing with a believer who has been overcome with sin. We need to spend some time on this issue of sin because I am sure that most of us have a distorted view on what the Bible claims is sin and that will greatly impact your interpretation and application of this verse. For some of you this next part of the teaching may be "old news," but still I believe that it is good to refresh this truth in our minds over and over again.

In the Greek, this word translated "sin" in ***Galatians 6:1*** literally means one who has suffered a lapse or a deviation and it captures both the idea of an unintentional error as well as a willful transgression. We must ask ourselves, however, a lapse or a deviation from what. If we do not understand the answer to this question, then we run the risk of trying to restore the wrong thing and we might inadvertently help someone get on the wrong path and not the right path.

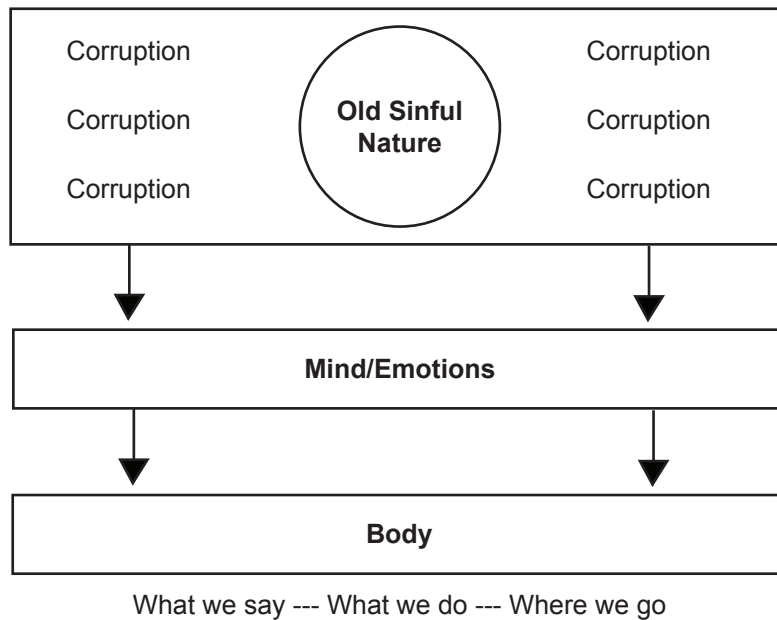
I believe the answer to this question does not lie in a comparison of good versus bad behavior. It is not answered through a determination of what is sin based on culture, tradition, or the norms of the day. I also do not believe, at its root, that this lapse or departure is referring to any of the lists of sins that we can put together from scripture. Those lists deal with the visible fruit of one who is in sin; in other words, they are not the sin but merely evidence of the sin.

By the time sinful behaviors are evident in our lives, it means that we have already given ourselves over to some area of wrong belief about God or we have chosen to not believe the truth about God in some area of our life. That is the sin, the behavior is the fruit. As a believer the truth about God is to be our baseline and anything that deviates from the truth is sin.

That is why when people traditionally try and bring reproof or correction into someone's life by dealing primarily with their bad behaviors, any resulting change is always short lived. This is because the behavior was not the root cause; it was merely the evidence of a lapse in actively believing the truth.

This is why it is so critical that the Who-2 in this scenario is someone that is spiritual. Someone who is able to see things from God's perspective and not man's perspective. Man looks at what is tangible (like behavior) and tries to repair it, **God looks at the heart and tries to engender belief and trust in the nature and character of God.** He knows that right belief will ultimately result in right behavior.

To help you understand this concept of sin and departure, I will use some of my wonderful graphics to help illustrate the issues.



This first chart illustrates man's basic construct. At the center of all that we are we have our core nature which according to the Bible is utterly sinful. Our mind and emotions are in effect slaves to our core nature and are held in bondage to its will. Our bodies, well, they do nothing independent of the mind/emotions. Our bodies are in effect also in bondage to our core nature and they merely carry out the instructions they receive.

In contrast to us, God is perfect and everything about Him is perfect. In Psalm 19:7 we are told that even the law is a perfect reflection of all that is God. As a result, God's requirement for us is perfection. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells us:

Matthew 5:48

Therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

But unfortunately, our condition is fatal. We have all sinned by nature and by choice. We have all deviated from God's standard of perfection.

Romans 3:23:

For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard.

1 John 1:8:

If we say that we have no sin we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Psalm 14:2-3:

The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if there is even one with real understanding, one who seeks for God. But no, all have turned away from God; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not even one!

The tragic result is that all that we are, and all that we do, including every thought, every motive, and our very existence has been corrupted by sin and therefore by definition is a deviation from God, a deviation from the truth, and unacceptable in the sight of God.

Romans 7:18-19

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

However, as with everything that transpires in our relationship with God, where we are unable He is able. God gracious provides to us the solution for our terminal condition.

John 1:12-13

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God.

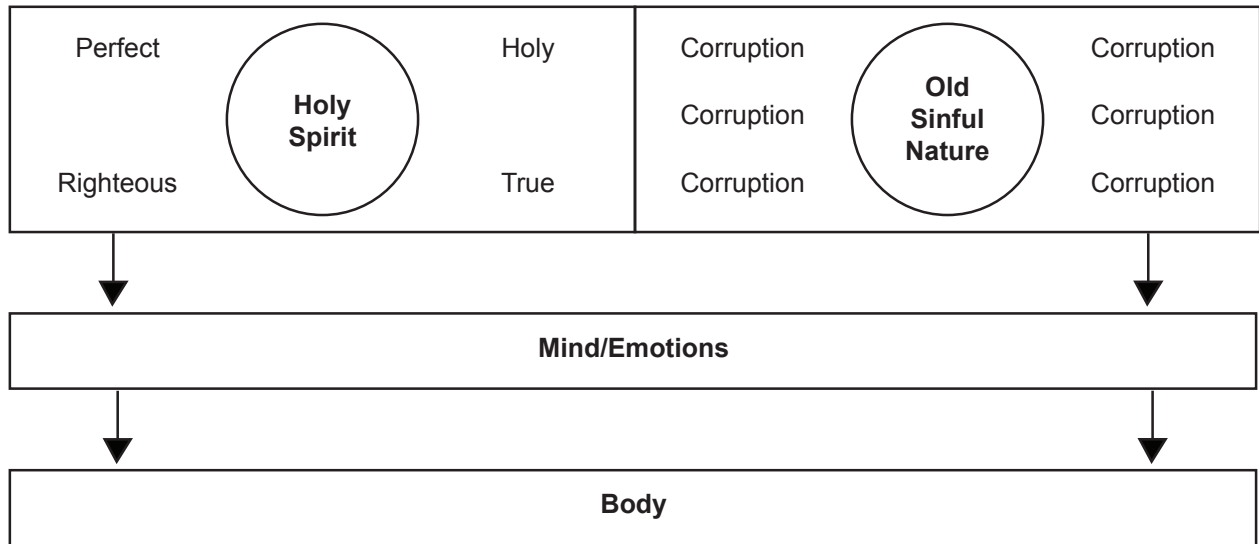
2 Corinthians 5:17-18

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

John 3:6

Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from Heaven.

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, God creates within us a new aspect to our being; a new nature that is separate and distinct from our *Old Sinful Nature*. And God places Himself within us, in the person of the Holy Spirit, to live in our being and to be the very voice of God in our life.



What we say --- What we do --- Where we go

According to Ephesians, this new nature is created in God's likeness righteous, holy, and true. Thus, it meets the standard of God for perfection; but, keep in mind, it is all based on Him and what He does in us and through us: His perfection.

Ephesians 4:21-23:

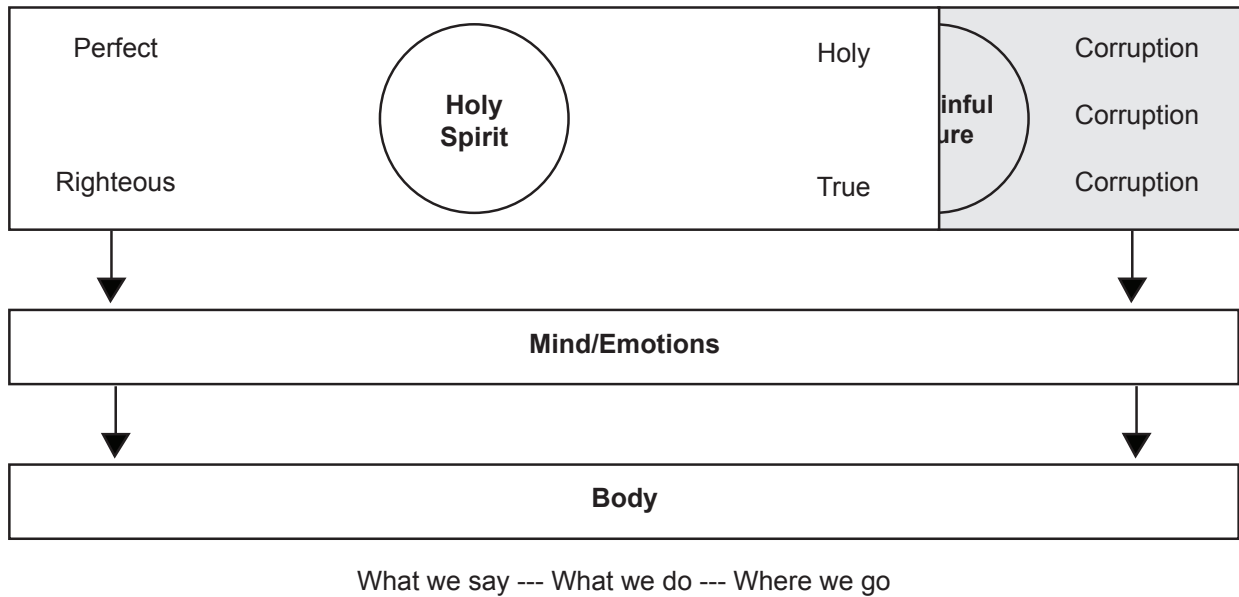
Since you have heard all about him and have learned the truth that is in Jesus, throw off your old evil nature and your former way of life which is rotten through and through, full of lust and deception. Instead there must be a spiritual renewal of your thoughts and attitudes. You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness—righteous, holy, and true.

Therefore, because the source is pure and undefiled, whatever flows from the **New Creation** is a perfect work for it derives from the divine. Alternatively, whatever flows from your *Old Sinful Nature* is always corrupted by sin—through and through.

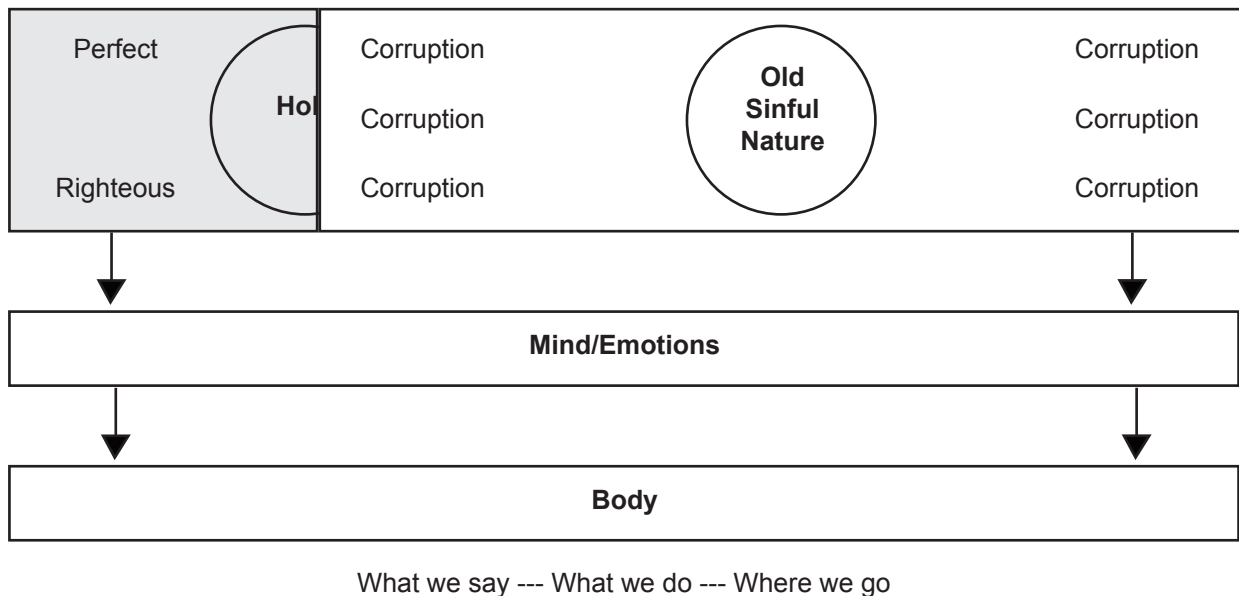
Romans 8:5-8

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

The choice is yours to either live a life that is dominated by the Spirit or a life that is dominated by the flesh. Everything is dependent upon which side you feed or where you direct your thoughts. The **New Creation** lives by faith: each time you actively believe the truth about God, the Spirit takes a more dominant position in your life.



However, with each area of wrong belief or unbelief, your *Old Sinful Nature* squeezes the Spirit to a place where it has little to no control over your life.



The key is your mind and emotions; that is where the battle is fought. If you focus your mind and emotions on the truth of God and subject yourselves to that truth (in other words you let the Word of God have ultimate authority over your life), then you will experience life and peace as God promised. If, however, you open your mind and emotions to the things of the world, the messages of the enemy, the desires of your flesh, then you will live in a state of deviation from the truth and your bodies will follow suit. You will begin

to make choices that are rooted in the desires of your *Old Sinful Nature* and soon you will find that you are overcome with sin.

With this understanding, hopefully you realize that any deviation from the truth about God (any area wrong belief or issue of unbelief) is sin. This should rewrite your view of sin being only about “bad” and “unholy” things. As shocking as it may be, even the most religious, honorable, and charitable of acts can be sin if they are birthed from our *Old Sinful Nature* and not from the Spirit of God. It is all about the source! That is why in Galatians 6:15-16 Paul says:

Galatians 6:15-16

What counts is whether we have really been changed into new and different people. May God’s mercy and peace be upon all those who live by this principle. They are the new people of God.

Where. Let’s move to the “where.” Where we engage a person is not the issue, but where we guide them is. We are to guide people to the right path—the path of faith. This requires us to get our hands dirty as we are to help them see their point of departure—the areas where they do not believe God or the areas where they have a mistaken view of God. This is our job!

I warn you, this will not be easy for most people will put up one heck of a fight. After all, at the core of the *Old Sinful Nature* is pride and if you touch on that with the truth of God, it will raise its ugly head and fight for its life. So if you are one who is spiritual and God has called you to help a person who has been overcome with sin, then you are going to need to be extremely patient and gentle for it might get ugly. You cannot be afraid of conflict, you cannot be afraid of confrontation, you cannot be afraid of being attacked and dragged through the mud.

Rather, you will need to gently and humbly help that person back on to the path of faith. We are instructed to be gentle because we are not to crush someone when they are in this place; we are not to make their burden worse. However, this does not mean that you are not going to have extreme emotions and not have extreme reactions to what they throw at you; of course you will! You might even get angry and hurt and say things you don’t want to say. But don’t let that dissuade you or hinder you.

Being gentle means that your heart and attitude is not one of bullying and trying to beat the truth into someone; rather, it is trying to lead them in an attempt to help them see. Going back to the metaphor of taking a speck out of someone’s eye, that is a very sensitive procedure. You have to be very gentle or you could cause serious damage.

In addition, you need to be humble. This means that you are so aware of the fact that if you choose to listen to your *Old Sinful Nature* that you will similarly be living a life of sin; so you know you can’t be haughty in your own estimation of yourself.

God wants you who are spiritual to cognizant of the fact that your ability to even see the speck in your brother’s eyes has everything to do with His provision and not your “spirituality.” In actuality, God is the one who removed your own log; therefore, He is the one that gets all the credit, glory and honor; not you!

Therefore, you must stay dependent upon Him at all times. You can never approach someone in sin with the attitude of “you got it all down;” “you’re living the holy life, so what is their problem;” or a “suck it up and just do it right” attitude. That is the wrong way and such arrogance is not of the Spirit but is of the flesh and is equally as sinful as anything the person you are trying to help has done.

Gentleness and humility are also very effective adversaries to the pride that is rooted in the other person. If you are gentle and humble, you will not fall prey to the methods that pride is used to utilizing. Pride loves to make things personal, find ways to attack back and deflect the real issues; but a person who is humble and gentle can trust themselves to God and not let the words and emotions of another control them. It is like spiritual armor against pride.

When. The “when” is absolutely pivotal. Galatians 6:1 is not saying that we automatically have the role of spiritual Sherriff of the house; thus, we are not to walk around constantly judging and evaluating everyone looking for sin. Yes, we are to be diligent and watch out for each other, as the writer of Hebrews explains.

Hebrews 12:14-16

Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

Looking out for each other is a far different thing than believing it is your job to root sin out of others. That is not your automatic assignment. However, if you see a brother or sister who has been overcome by sin, and if God gives you the assignment, then you are absolutely, out of love, to go and help regardless of the inconvenience or the disruption it brings into your life.

And you are never to believe that you are too important, too special, or too busy to help someone in need. Who knows, maybe one day God is going to use some of you in amazing and very public ways, but if your fame or status ever causes you to believe you are too important to help someone that God assigns to you, then it means you are actually a nobody and are walking out of your old man. Therefore, the key to the “when” is to know whether or not God gave you the assignment.

John 9:4

All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end.

We are also told in Ephesians 2:10 that God created us new in Christ so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago. So in this you must be sure. If He did not specifically assign you the task, then anything you do with regard to your brother or sister in the Lord, regardless of your good intentions, will not derive from the Spirit; and, thus, by definition will be what? Yes, sin. This is so hard to truly believe because for years we have been programmed with a different reality, but even our good intentioned acts, if they do not derive from a leading of the Spirit, are wrong.

Galatians 5:16;25

So I advise you to live according to your new life in the Holy Spirit. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves ... If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

If we are to live in the Spirit and move by the leading of the Spirit, as stated in these verses that precede our command to help one who is overcome by sin, then naturally we are only to take on this role when God makes it clear that He has assigned us the task.

Why are we to help others in this way, because in so doing we are acting like Christ; we love others with His Agape love. I love the word picture that Paul paints in **verse 2**, we are to take a burden, take a weight and help carry it so that our brother or sister can regain their strength. We are to ease the burden just enough and remove the weight of sin for them in order that they will be free to see and understand the truth.

Taking this word picture and putting it into tangible actions will require you to spend the time to understand the actual burden—what is really going on inside a person. You must understand the person's heart and how God has wired them so that you can effectively bring the love of Jesus to the place where they have felt the need to trust themselves or something and someone other than God. To do this you have to be willing to bend down, lift up, and carry your friend. This is not about throwing a couple of verses at them and telling them that they are sinning. It is not about chastising them and making them feel stupid. It is about placing your feet where their feet have walked in an attempt to see how they see the world and the events of their life so you can effectively know where the love of Jesus needs to be applied.

Because this process involves your mind, your heart, and your emotions, Paul is careful to instruct you

to stay in the Spirit and not be tempted by the same area of sin. Please, don't down play this issue and the real potential that you might just find yourself struggling with similar strains of wrong belief and unbelief; such things are contagious. Besides, you must remember that your enemy the Devil is seeking to devour you, to destroy you, and steal away from you all that God has built into your life.

He hates you and his hatred is very personal. So he constantly schemes of ways to make you fall, and when you are carrying someone else's burden, he will try and trip you up so that it falls on you and crushes you. And once you are down he will try and devastate you. Just so you know, I am not exaggerating; this is precisely what Peter told us.

1 Peter 5:8-10

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.

Notwithstanding the Devil's attack, we are able to resist his assault and thereby avoid temptation by being fully clothed in the armor of God and begin absolutely stubborn in our commitment to the truth. We must stand firm in our faith. This is how we defeat the enemy and protect ourselves when we are carrying the burdens of another.

Ephesians 6:11-14

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

This is the who, what, where, when and why we are to be God's vessels through which He can bring loving reproof and correction into a life of a brother or sister in the Lord who is overcome with sin. I know a lot of people do not like someone in their personal businesses, especially if they are overcome with sin. The last thing they want is someone being all spiritual around them; and, sadly, our culture totally reinforces this attitude.

But in reality, it is one of the most loving things you can do for another person. If you really care for each other, if you really want to experience a community of love in Jesus Christ, you will not only watch out for one another, but you will let God use you in this way and in so doing you will become His eyes, His voice, His hands, and a vessel of His Agape love.

Let's pray.



The Requirement of Love - 6a

One overriding theme in our study on the Faces of Love has been the necessity for faith in every part of our life. If our ultimate experience of God is His Agape love flowing in and through our lives then our pathway to reaching that goal is faith. We have defined faith as being birthed in our lives when we actively believe the truth. This means that it is not enough to know the truth about God (even unbelievers have plenty of head knowledge about God and the Bible), it is not enough to believe the truth about God (most of Christianity believes the Bible, still few express God's Agape love), but it is only when we make choices according to our knowledge and our belief that faith will be birthed in our life.

Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God or, as it says in the Greek, to be fully agreeable with God.

Think about this idea of being agreeable with God by relating it practically to a new person you meet at work or at school. If you approached this person and found that you had significant disagreements about many areas of life from your values, your politics, your religion, your work ethic, what you enjoy doing during your off hours, the kind of food you eat, the types of movies you like to see, the music you listen to, and so on, it is likely that you two would not become the best of friends or probably even spend much time together. There are just too many parts of your life that are not agreeable; therefore, friendship, intimacy, and fellowship would not naturally occur, it would be something you would have to really work towards.

You would have to make a choice to rework your life to try and appreciate that other persons' likes and dislikes; you would have to spend time in their world, so to speak, in order to have any hope of the relationship developing. If you don't make a choice to make this level of effort and this level of investment, this person will always be nothing more than an acquaintance.

This is the idea behind faith and being agreeable with God. For most of us, our philosophies, norms, values, attractions, passions, desires, are not agreeable with God, which by definition means that our faith is under developed and as a result our intimacy and fellowship is constrained. This is why God's Agape love is not widely seen overflowing from the body of Christ; and it is also why many unbelievers are unimpressed with what Christianity has to offer them.

To turn this around and reverse this situation, we must learn to live and walk by faith. I bet you have heard that before in many places. Sounds easy, right? I wish it was as easy as it sounds for we would all be experiencing this amazing and overwhelming abundance of God's love in our lives. Unfortunately, we have some pretty strong forces that work against our ability to simply believe the truth about God. There are many things in our life that cause us to not want to align our thoughts, values, passions and desires with God's.

1. Our experience with people who claim to be Christians or claim to be representatives of God, including parents, teachers, pastors, friends, etc, yet which have left us predominately unimpressed as their lives are, spiritually speaking, unremarkable;
2. The tragedies that have happened in our life which cause us to doubt the love of God and His sovereignty over our life;
3. The manner in which God has dealt with us (like when it seems He keeps His distance or remains silent) when we tried to turn to Him or look to Him for answers, for help, or when we ask for just a little proof of His existence;
4. The unbelief of our friends and family members and the confident hostility of our teachers, educators, political leaders etc;
5. The notion that we must have it all figured out before we can really move forward with God and the frustration of our inability to even make any headway in "figuring it all out;"

6. Our connection to, and even dependence on, the tangible world and the things that entice our flesh;
7. The Devil and his minions that are attempting to destroy us and devastate the faith that God has given us.

We could spend some time expanding on this list but I don't think that is really necessary. I am sure we all relate, to some extent, with every one of these points. But what I want you to consider is the extent to which these events, situations, and occurrences have imprinted themselves so deeply in your emotions that they have created a real emotional barrier between your rational mind and the truth thereby impacting your ability to live by faith.

Our emotions are extremely powerful; and the scary thing is that they have an even stronger impact on our ability to walk in faith than does our rational mind. In fact, our emotions can convince us of so many things that may or may not even be real. Take for example, how strong the emotion of fear plays in your life. If you were to objectively analyze each area of fear that possesses you, I believe you will find that most of those areas are governed by assumption, inference, or irrational information that is not supported by the true facts. Yet, to you, the fear is real and you end up making decisions on that emotion and it impacts everything in your life: your relationships, your ability to succeed at work or at school, and fundamentally your relationship with God.

We would like to think that we are in control and have a handle on our emotions but the reality is, if not submitted to the Spirit, our emotions will rule over our intellect. I find this to be so strange because our emotions are not tangible—we cannot touch them—yet they rule over a huge part of our tangible world. They are so real to us and so powerful that unless we have been trained and conditioned otherwise, our emotions will almost always win the battle over our rational mind.

They become a voice in our lives to which most of us have ceded great authority. “We don't like this,” “we don't like that,” “we feel this” or “we don't feel that.” We throw these phrases into almost every discussion, argument, or serious exchange of communication that we have. We even use these kinds of phrases to navigate our spiritual relationship and define the parts of God that we agree with and the parts that we don't really care for and really don't want to believe. How many times have you heard someone say things like the following?

- I tried God and did all the things a good Christian is supposed to do but I just did not feel Him do anything in my life.
- I prayed the so called prayer of salvation but I don't feel any different and He did not change anything, so I might as well continue living the way I have been living all these years.
- I have been seeking God but I just don't sense His presence.
- I prayed but I don't feel like God is listening to me because He is not doing anything to help me or to change things in my life.
- I feel God wants me to go into ministry.
- I feel it's ok to be where I am with God; if He wanted me to be different He would make me different.

If each of us were really honest and were to examine our life, I believe it would be clear that in large part we have ceded authority over what we believe and the choices we make to our emotions. Sadly, in so doing, we have minimized the authority of the Word of God in our life. This is sad, yes, but it also explains why so few experience a life lived in agreement with God.

The truth is that our feelings are virtually useless when it comes to being a gauge of spiritual realities. In fact, when we base our decisions on our feelings we invite disaster into our lives. Our feelings are always subject to change by our perceptions of what is happening in our life at any moment in time; they simply are not stable. If we perceive risk and threat, we respond one way, if we perceive pleasure and safety we respond another way notwithstanding the fact that our ability to really understand what is happening in our life and the reasons things are happening are so limited.

I have also found that most of us are waiting for God to give us some sort of sign or a feeling so we can know He is real and know that we can trust Him with our whole life. And if we just had that sign or that overwhelming feeling, we could confidently move forward in faith. After all, that is not too much to ask of God; surely He could do this one little thing.

But you must realize that you when you hold a feeling or a sign as your measuring rod, ultimately you would be putting your faith in the memory of that feeling or the sign rather than in the unchanging character and nature of God. And as soon as that feeling faded, you would need more and want more and demand more. This is a cycle that never ends. In stark contrast to the instability and insatiability of our feelings, there is God.

Hebrews 13:8

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Jesus is always reliable – for He never changes!

Who He said He was, and is, and will be, is never subject to any volatility at all. This is why His Word is the truth and is to be the only measuring rod for our life. Nothing on this earth or outside of this earth can ever alter the Word of God—not circumstances, not unreliable people, not our willingness or unwillingness to believe, and not even the Devil and his hoards of antagonists to our faith. Sure the Devil may be able to entice your emotions with artificial religious and spiritual experiences, but He will not be able to alter the reliability of the Word of God. The Words will stand true and will always prevail and continue to endure long after our feelings have totally failed us.

Matthew 24:35

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

Isaiah 40:7-8

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

So even if you agree intellectually with what I have been saying, to live by faith you still have to find a way to bridge this understanding to your choices in a way that crosses over the emotions which fight against your believing and trusting God. When you make faith choices to live what you believe and what you know to be true from the Word of God, you will silence the voice of doubt that is embedded deep in your emotions.

So where does this kind of faith come from? Is it a gift? Is it passed out by the Holy Spirit only to those that He chooses? Is it something we can develop? Is it even possible to have more of it?

These are serious questions. Most of us want more faith, we want to be able to believe God, we want to be able to experience more of Him, but for some reason it seems so illusory and no matter how bad we want it, we just don't seem to ever get there. We become confused when we look at others who seem, at least from the outside, that they are experiencing a life of faith and we wonder why we cannot seem to get there. So we find ourselves asking God to give us more faith and we look up to heaven waiting and waiting for God to deliver, but all we experience is a strange and harrowing silence.

Let's see what God reveals to us about these questions. Romans 12:3 says: God has given to each of us a measure of faith. This word "given" means that He has apportioned to each of us a slice. Does this mean that some people get a bigger slice than others? If so maybe that explains why you have such trouble going deeper with God; you just did not get a big enough slice.

However, before you let your emotions run down the path where you think that your doubt and your struggles are really God's fault, the Bible makes it clear that it really does not matter how large your slice of

the faith pie is, for even with the smallest amount of faith you can do the unfathomable.

Matthew 17:20-21

For truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.

The idea here is that it does not take much; if cultivated and nourished properly, even the smallest amounts of faith can grow so powerful that what otherwise would be impossible becomes possible in the will of God. Sticking with this metaphor of the mustard seed:

Matthew 13:31-33

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

Therefore, it does not matter what size your slice of the pie is; all that should matter to you is that you have been given a slice. Because if you have a slice, and all believer's have been given a slice, your ability to experience the fullness of God directly depends on whether or not you nurture and water the faith you have been given.

Notice, Jesus does not expect any of you to have this full and amazing tree of faith right away. It is something that is grown and developed. It starts as a mere seed, grows into a sapling and ultimately this phenomenal tree. This is extremely comforting. Do you understand the implication of this? You don't have to have everything worked out and you don't have to have all your issues of doubt solved in order to move forward in God. The whole thing is a process that God wants to take you through. So don't be discouraged by your doubt and don't feel that you are hopeless, just start watering and nurturing your seed of faith.

Romans 10:17

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

I am sorry but there is no way around this truth, our faith is nurtured and watered by the Word of God. You must let His Word wash over your souls and feed you if you are ever going to grow in respect to your intimacy and fellowship with God.

1 Peter 2:1-3

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

I know this comes across as one of those Christian clichés. All of us have tried so hard to get something from reading our Bibles; however, few of us have found anything there other than mounds of information and an occasional comforting verse. It has hardly been this great source of power and strength that preachers try to make it out to be.

Over and over we are told to "long" for the Word, but to many it is not entirely clear why. It's just a book and every time you read it you walk away feeling you have done your religious deed, but nothing else really happens. Now despite your feelings on the matter, please, whatever you do heed the warning in Proverbs 3:5 and 7.

Proverbs 3:5

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.

Proverbs 3:7

Do not be wise in your own eyes.

If you rely on your own understanding of these things, if you give heed to your feelings in these matters, if your experiences govern your beliefs, I guarantee that you will experience very little of the kindness of the Lord. Remember, Proverbs 14:12, "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death."

You have the choice to do it different than everyone else. You don't have to be like so many Christians whose lives are lived in frustration and confusion always striving and never resting. God has something better for you. The reason you need to be in the Word is that it truly contains all that you need for life; it is the truth by which you are to live.

Psalms 119:160

The sum of Thy word is truth

As Jesus said, in Matthew 4, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." If you remember the story, Jesus said this during the encounter that He had with the devil where Satan was tempting Jesus with wrong belief and unbelief. You see, Jesus did not succumb to the enemy's tricks; rather, He took each area of temptation and compared it with what He knew to be true in the Word of God. He used the truth to combat the lie. And it was through this process that He was successful in resisting the enemy.

If you remember, Jesus had just fasted for 40-days and 40-nights and was absolutely weak and famished. The devil merely said: "If you are the Son of God change these stones into loaves of bread." That was it; that was the extent of the temptation. It does not seem like much to us but Satan was attempting to get Jesus to step back from His absolute dependence upon God and take matters into His own hands and provide for His own needs. Satan was attempting to get Jesus to prioritize His feelings and His needs over the will of God in His life. But Jesus would have none of it.

Notice, however, it was not enough for Jesus to know the truth, it was not enough for Him to believe the truth, He had to choose to live by it.

When His situation was dire, after all He was literally starving, when He was at His weakest and needed food to strengthen His being, He still chose to only do what His Father told Him to do, and He refused to follow His feelings.

This is how it is done. This is how the Word of God becomes authoritative in your life and how it becomes your very source of life. This is how faith is nurtured and watered. The process we are to go through is the same as what Jesus did when He was tempted with wrong belief and unbelief. We are to start by taking just one area in which we are tempted to rely on our own wisdom, our own understanding, and our own feelings, and in which we want to yield to the cries of our heart, and instead choose to live by the truth that we say we believe. And we do this one temptation at a time—one area of wrong belief and unbelief at a time.

As you experience success in resisting the devil and standing in truth in this one area, you will begin to realize that it is possible to have faith in another area. You will start to be convinced that God's Word is true not just for those "special" people, but it is also true for you! This victory then gives you strength and tangible reasons to believe that you can do it again in the next area, and the next, and the next. Soon this snowballs and the enemy's ability to tempt you with wrong belief and unbelief becomes much harder and suddenly you will find that you are standing in your faith unmovable, for God is with you.

For those of you who have serious struggle with doubt about whom God is and what He will be for you, I encourage you not to fret and get discouraged. Rather, you merely need to stop spending so much time focusing on those doubts. Instead, find an area where you do believe—where God has proved Himself faithful—and you have had success. Focus on that area. Be consumed with that truth and let it occupy your mind and your heart.

Then think about all the times when God has led you, when He spoke to you, or spoke to someone else through you, when He answered your prayers, or when you tasted of His goodness during a time of worship. Let your mind dwell on these things and you will find that your emotions will move from their attachment to your doubt and will become affixed to the wonderful things God has done for you. When your emotions make that shift, they become a powerful advocate in your experience of God.

I am going to take you through an example of when Peter instructed believers in a similar manner. It is a bit hard to follow but stick with me and it will become clear. Those to whom Peter was writing had plenty of reasons why they should doubt and be unsure of God in their lives; things were simply not going the way they had hoped. They were suffering and encountering many problems and God just seemed to be a bit too far out of reach or too disinterested in the gravity of their situation. Peter writes:

1 Peter 1:3-9

A Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

Another way to say this would be as follows: focus on one area of truth and it will help you face your doubts. Focus on the fact that God, in His marvelous mercy, has assured your salvation and that it is protected by His power. It is reserved for you and will not fade, perish or diminish in any capacity. Rejoice in this truth. Focus on this truth. This view of eternity will help put into perspective your current sufferings. You are not truly living for this life but for the next.

In fact, even though you have to go through trials and difficult times, such events and circumstances are giving you an opportunity to shine in eternity. Focus on the reality of the faith that you do have. After all, you love Him even though you don't see Him. See, that is evidence of your amazing faith; very few people can make this claim. You are one of those special people who believe in Jesus and His work on the cross even though you have never seen Him with your own eyes.

Can you imagine, even some of those who walked with Jesus did not accomplish this great act of faith.

Now, let's take this same example and apply it in a personal manner. You are to focus on the truth of your great salvation. Let the reality of what God has done for you become so personal that it becomes a place of refuge. Hold to this truth and the devil will not be able to threaten you with doubts about your salvation. Further, he will have a hard time getting you to be obsessed on the difficulties of the day, for your mind will be set on the glories to come. You will have victory and not find yourself in despair when you face various trials. You will even be able to rejoice in the fact that your faith is unique and it is strong.

From your position of strength, you will then be free to seek out another truth in the Word of God and begin to make it personal—make it your own. If you continue this process you will find that your seed of faith will sprout and develop into a sapling and if you continue, and continue, and continue, before long you will find that it is an unmovable tree that provides help and comfort to others.

This is how you become agreeable to God and align your thoughts, your ideas, your values, your perspectives with His. This is how you nurture your faith. Then this next step is critical. In order to maintain and even enhance your experience with God, you are to continue in the process by moving from these large areas of wrong belief and unbelief to the very thoughts that invade your mind. Yes, you are to take each thought that enters your mind and compare it to the truth in the Word of God.

Remember, do this one-by-one. Then take each thought that does not align up with the God and replace it with the truth. If you do this, I guarantee you that your faith will flourish like never before and you will experience an unbelievable and undeniable outpouring of the power and the presence of God in your life. All those years of struggle will seem so ridiculous to you. You will wonder how in the world you could have ever spent so much time in that place of spiritual destitution. You will cherish what you experience in God and you will never want to move from that level of intimacy and fellowship. It will be nothing short of beautiful.

Without faith, it is impossible to be agreeable to God. Faith is the pathway to experiencing God's Agape love flowing in and through your life to others. This is His will for your life; walk in it.

Let's Pray.



Sacrifice of Praise - 6b

I thought we were going to move to the book of John this week, but over and over the Lord impressed on me that He wanted me to add one more piece to our practical understanding of how we can walk by faith in the Spirit of God. For if you do not walk in the Spirit, your experience of God's Agape love will be more than sparse. If your goal is to have God's Agape love flowing in and through you, then the pathway to this reality is faith. You must learn to live by faith in all areas of your life; in fact, this should become an ever increasing reality in your daily experience with God.

Last week we talked about some tangible steps that you can take in order to battle the doubts that raise their ugly heads, and which hinder your ability to walk by faith in the Spirit of God. Tonight, I want to continue with this focus and introduce you to another tangible way to enhance your ability to sustain living in that place where you actively believe the truth—where you chose to act upon what you know and believe to be true from the Word of God.

As we know, one of the biggest barriers to our living in faith is our obsession with “self.” In fact, most of our wrong belief or unbelief is rooted not in the absence of our knowledge about God, and not in the absence of stories that demonstrate who God is and how He deals with mankind. Rather, our wrong belief and unbelief is rooted in areas where we believe God has not been for us what we have expected Him to be or where He has not done for us what we have expected Him to do.

The un-met expectations of the “me” dominate our desire and fights against our ability to simply trust in God. These desires aggressively battle against our resting in God's love and His sovereign hand over our lives. They cause us to forget that God's goal is our **oneness** with Him, and that this **oneness** is accomplished through His conforming us into the image of Christ. They cause us to forget that God will use all things (good and bad) to complete this work in our life. They cause us to forget that our sharing in and even reflecting the glory of God is His ultimate purpose and is the “why” behind all that He allows to happen in our life. They cause us to forget that ultimate experience is when we allow Jesus to live His life in and through us; which by definition means more of Him and less of me.

The desires of the “me” are like a dark-hole that sucks in all the truths that we know about God and all the realities of His love and leaves us with nothing but this sense of un-met desire and dissatisfaction. And the scary thing is that the more we turn our attention to this dark-hole the bigger and more aggressive it becomes and the harder it sucks.

We get caught in this cycle where all we think about is our life, our pain, our sadness, our depression and so on. And it is so weird because when we are in this place, everything that happens to us just seems to confirm all the reasons we have for being there in the first place—God is not doing His job in the way we want. As a result, our perspectives and our ability to see the truth become distorted by the intense sucking power of that dark-hole.

Personally, I am very familiar with this dark hole of the “me” especially during the past 7-years as God has taken me through what I can describe, without exaggeration, as terror and immense difficulty. This is sad to admit, but as God has allowed me to go through crazy levels of pain, there are times where all I do is focus on what is happening to me. And as I complain, moan, groan, and obsess on “me” I am taken deeper and deeper into this dark-hole. Inevitably, I am overcome with depression, sadness and at times even despair.

This is a horrible place to live as I am virtually useless to anyone else in my life. In the past I cried a lot and spent a lot of my time talking about how mean and cruel God was being to me. Yet, to my dismay, expressing my discontent to others did not help me feel any better. I was not as if all I needed was a good cry and then I was going to be ok; no, the more I drank from this infected well the sicker I became and the further I was sucked into the darkness.

After a while, I could even see myself walking this path heading straight toward that dark-hole, but I rarely stopped. I don't know why; maybe in some sick and twisted way, I thought was trying to get back at God by not cooperating with Him and by showing others how harsh He can be.

But no matter what I did and what I said, God would not relent of His plan for my life; He was not moved by my complaint. He also was not moved by the level of distress in my life; He knew it was necessary in order to cause me to relent and let Him have rule and authority over all these different areas of my life.

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

My living in this dark-hole, however, was not ok with God. That was not how He wanted me to endure my time of testing. He did not want me wallowing in sadness, depression and despair; He wanted me to choose the route of escape He had set before me. He told me that I did not have to stay in my glass cage of emotion, and that I was in effect a prisoner of my own volition. He told me I had presented myself as a slave to my *Old Sinful Nature*.

But God wanted me to be free and live free. Even in the midst of harrowing personal tragedy, He wanted me to live through the **New Creation** that He birthed in my life and He was going to show me the way out of that dark-hole. He was going to show me the way to practically silence the endless yearning of the “me” and the horrible ache of disappointment and disillusionment that settled in my heart?

The pathway that God showed me was the road of sacrifice. This sacrifice, however, was not found in my giving up of food for some period of time, it was not captured in my attempt to refrain from certain behavior, and it did not require any form of self-inflicted physical pain; rather, it was the willingness merely to consider all that God had been to me, what He taught me, and how much He really did love me, and then thank Him for all of it. That is it! He wanted my mouth to literally say thank you; He wanted my voice to express gratitude. That is all He required of me—once again proving that His load is light and His burden is easy.

Hebrews 13:15

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

All God wanted from me was an honest expression of thanks; but keep in mind this was not for Him, He does not need me to appreciate Him. That is a silly notion.

Job 35:5-8

Look up into the sky, and see the clouds high above you. If you sin, how does that affect God? Even if you sin again and again, what effect will it have on him? If you are good, is this some great gift to him? **What could you possibly give him?** No, your sins affect only people like yourself, and your good deeds also affect only humans.

As with all things God asks of us, it is for us to experience more of Him. God wanted me to learn to lift up a sacrifice of praise to Him because He knew that for me to utter an honest expression of thanks that I would have to push past my feelings, push past my anger, push past my hostility, push past my disappointment and my disillusionment, set aside my expectations of Him, and objectively consider all that He had done and was doing in me and through me.

He knew that if I were to pull my eyes off of the “me” for just a moment in time and took an honest look at His hand in my life, that I would find so many things to be thankful for it would be somewhat overwhelming. He knew that if I offered up my thanks as a sacrifice of praise that it would jettison me out of that dark-hole and back on the road of life and peace. So what did I have to be thankful for?

1. He gave me scriptures that charted out the journey He was going to take me through. I knew before it started that it was going to be a ride filled with terror and pain (so at least I was not surprised when all hell broke loose on my life).
2. He gave me promises that said this trial would come to an end; thank God this is not my appointed lot in life. He said that He will calm the storm and settle the waves and I would be glad. He further said that when it was finished, He would lead me to my desired haven and I would enjoy marvelous growth and fruitfulness in my life.
3. He handpicked a couple of magnificent friends that walked with me through every day of the painful journey.
4. Although He allowed so many things in my life to be destroyed, at the same time He protected me in so many ways that I did not deserve.
5. He continually had mercy and compassion on me and did not deal with me on the basis of my sin.
6. He opened up His word to me in ways that allowed me to see things that have always been there but for some reason have been buried in the minds and hearts of those within modern Christianity.
7. He allowed me to bring cohesiveness to these truths and the ability to articulate them in a comprehensive way across the entire Bible.
8. He gave me a boldness and a confidence to teach these truths notwithstanding the fact that most people have not wanted to deal with the reality of what it would mean to them if they were to live only doing what God wants them to do, only saying what He wants them to say, and going only where He wants them to go.
9. I could eventually see that He was working a release for me of years of relational bondage.
10. He sent others into the midst of my mess to help me and help my family in ways that were perfectly timed and perfectly needed.

Although this storm has been horrific, it has become clear to me that His hands have been all over my life the entire time. By the way, if I were to list the details that underlie these broad general reasons to be thankful, I could write a lengthy book of individual circumstances for which I could be thankful.

Yet, getting to the place where I could focus on the goodness of God and offer up this kind of sacrifice was more difficult than I can put in words. I resisted; I felt I had a right to be angry at God and I thought He owed me more than He was giving me. But God eventually showed me that my wrong belief was not only hurting myself, but I was hurting those who were dependent upon me both relationally and spiritually.

That was not something I wanted as I deeply cared for those who were still in my life (after all most people I knew and loved had either abandoned me or just stopped being my friend altogether). But when God said that this would be a sacrifice of praise, He was not kidding. I had to sacrifice my right to be angry. I had to sacrifice my right to wallow in self-pity. I had to sacrifice my right to be obsessed with myself. I had to sacrifice my expectations of God doing what I wanted, when I wanted. I had to sacrifice my emotions and even my logical mind on the altar of thanksgiving.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-19

Always be joyful. Keep on praying. No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit.

God used this scripture in Thessalonians to help me understand that being thankful was not just a good idea, it was not just something to help me through the pain, it was not just for those who were dependent upon me, and it was not just some psychological coping method, but was the very will of God for my life. In fact, according to what Paul says when we are not thankful, regardless of what is happening in our life, we are stifling the Spirit of God. In other words, we are not walking by faith. We have given opportunity for the *Old Sinful Nature* to once again dominate our being and smash the Spirit to such a small place in our life

that His voice is hard to hear and His leading is hard to discern.

When I considered that this was God's will for my life, I knew I had to make the sacrifice. After all, I have always said I want to know the will of God for my life and there it was hitting me smack center in the jaw; I could not just ignore it.

Honestly, I wanted to be free from the dark-hole of the "me;" I just needed to know the way out and I needed to understand the motivation behind any action I was to take. By this time, I had become very sick of wallowing in my stuff; I was tired of demanding God to do what I want. I was also tired of my mess being the center of so many of the interactions I had with others. I was sickened by the fact that I had led some people down the same path and they landed in their own dark hole of the "me." I hated the fact that I spent so much time outside of close fellowship and intimacy with God, and I wanted the **oneness** that He was offering me. Thankfully, He was so merciful and compassionate toward me and infinitely patient.

At first, saying thank you to God was a huge battle. My emotions and my mind were waging war against my taking God serious since they were so beholden to the "me." But when I chose to consider God, my heart started to soften. I started to see layers and layers and layers of things I could be thankful for and I was amazed not only at what He had done in me but what He had done through me in the lives of others.

I came to realize how He uniquely chose me for this journey; how He helped me endure wave after wave of terror, opposition, and rejection; how He taught me so much about Him even though I was flailing around like a madman without hope; how He preserved the life of my children; and even how I am still standing and despite all my complaints I love Him more than ever and would never choose to go back to that place where I was at before this journey started.

Sure I had to suffer and pave the way for others to walk, but I have already seen many people find freedom from the bondage of the religion of Christianity. I have seen many people grow in their knowledge and love of Jesus. I have seen people know what it is like to hear the voice of the Lord for themselves and know how His Spirit leads them. I have also seen them choose to believe the truth of the Word of God and live by faith verses having to learn everything by experience.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not talking about giving thanks because my circumstances have gone from bad to good and I am now free to give you a post trauma account of things while I sit comfortably in the shade and drink my lemonade. No, that is not my life; my trials continually mutate and take on a different face of terror! However, I actually told God that once. I knew He wanted me to rest in Him and give thanks, so I told Him that I would love to do that if He would just stop the storm. That's all, just stop the storm. I said if He relented then I would give Him thanks and unending praise and everyone would know it. Well, He was not open to bartering; He did not like my deal. He wanted me to learn to offer up this sacrifice in the midst of my disappointment; for that is the only way it would be a sacrifice.

And, although my circumstances have not really changed, in offering up a sacrifice of thanks, I have actually been able to experience joy; a joy that is separate from the painful reality of my circumstances; a joy that has allowed me to be used by God and to serve others in His Agape love. This has been a shocking reality and something I never thought I would experience. Let's go back to the passage in 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-19

Always be joyful. Keep on praying. No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit.

Notice that this passage starts with the command to always be joyful. Not only is it a command, the verb tense indicates that this is to be our ongoing and continual state of being. As Christians we are to be people who continually live in and experience joy. I am not talking about some fake Christian trip where you walk around saying praise the Lord about everything and make everyone else feel very uncomfortable. I am sure you have all experienced people like that. I am talking about something entirely different.

I am talking about a joy that settles in your heart that enables you to function and live despite what is happening to you. It is a joy that enables you to care about others and actually give to them even when

your own life is in destitution. It is a joy that enables you to worship the Lord and take pleasure in Him even when He is not doing for you what you hope or dream that He will do. It is a joy that is experienced when you continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise that is the fruit of your lips that give thanks to His name. Let's turn back to Hebrews.

Hebrews 13:15

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

Notice that in order to offer up a sacrifice of praise such that you genuinely thank the Lord for who He is and what He has been to you, it must be done through Him. In other words, this form of sacrifice originates in the **New Creation**, from the divine, and is therefore a perfect offering acceptable to God. It is not something that you will be able to do on your own. It is not something that you can "will" to happen. It is not something that is a religious practice or spiritual discipline. It is birthed from the **New Creation** and it is an example of Jesus living His life through you, and Him giving you the very power to be in relationship with Him. Once again proving that His load is light and His burden is easy; for all that He asks of you, He is willing to do though you.

This alone should cause you to want to offer up a sacrifice of thanksgiving to Him. Can't you feel it? The Spirit within you wanting to break forth in loud and raucous applaud for how marvelous God really is and how He is the one who carries the load. I especially want to worship Him when I consider how limited my own perspective is of what is happening to me and the reasons God allows things in my life. God is absolutely marvelous and I love Him so much!

For your sake, no matter what is happening to you, I encourage you to offer up this kind of sacrifice which is most pleasing to God. Because it is a sacrifice, I know it is not easy; but trust me, it is worth it. When you taste of His joy, I believe that then you will be able to fully appreciate and distain how dark and how black the sickness of the "me" really is; and you won't want to wallow there any longer.

You will want the light of His joy to continually be at the center of your being. Not let me clearly state that this is not something that I have mastered. This is something that I have to keep coming back to over and over again. Just like walking in the Spirit of God by faith is a moment by moment decision and you can fall out of it as quickly as you can return to it, so is this state of being thankful. That is why we are instructed to continually offer up this kind of sacrifice. It is a choice that we must make each and every day, multiple times a day, which is why we are also told to keep on praying. This is the way to sustain an experience of joy and to silence the lies of the "me."

In this place, God will begin to use you to help lead others to that place of similarly experiencing His joy. Those moments will be precious to you as God's Agape love flows down from Him, to you, and overflow to others. It will be a beautiful work that you will never forget. Offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, which is the fruit of your lips that give thanks to His name. This is God's will for your life.

In closing, I just want to read Psalm 145. My sister sent me a note with this psalm referenced and it just brought great comfort and joy and I thought we should just read it and let it wash over us for it more than captures all that we have been studying.

Psalm 145

I will exalt you, my God and King, and praise your name forever and ever. I will praise you every day; yes, I will praise you forever. Great is the Lord! He is most worthy of praise! No one can measure his greatness. Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power.

I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor and your wonderful miracles. Your awe-inspiring deeds will be on every tongue; I will proclaim your greatness. Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness; they will sing with joy about your righteousness.

The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. The Lord is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation. All of your works will thank you, Lord, and your faithful followers will praise you. They will speak of the glory of your kingdom; they will give examples of your power. They will tell about your mighty deeds and about the majesty and glory of your reign. For your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. You rule throughout all generations.

The Lord always keeps his promises; he is gracious in all he does. The Lord helps the fallen and lifts those bent beneath their loads. The eyes of all look to you in hope; you give them their food as they need it. When you open your hand, you satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing.

The Lord is righteous in everything he does; he is filled with kindness. The Lord is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth. He grants the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cries for help and rescues them. The Lord protects all those who love him, but he destroys the wicked. I will praise the Lord, and may everyone on earth bless his holy name forever and ever.

Let's pray.