

Loving people is our greatest expression of our love for God

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I've noticed something when I look online at facebook and other social media sites: many of my friends like to post inspirational pictures and quotes. Of course, there's no better theme to post on than *love*. Love for God. For children. For spouse. For life. For Double Stuff Oreos (PIC). You name it. And typically, the pictures, the images that provide the background usually look something like this (PIC). Beautiful, pleasant, awe-inspiring pictures of the mountains or of beautiful couples or happy children, right? You usually don't find inspirational quotes on love with pictures like this (PIC). Pictures that are dirty, messy, painful or depressing.

Love is a beautiful thing, but it's a hard thing, too. In fact, I just saw this on facebook, too (PIC). And the difficulty, the challenge, the pain in love is probably what we most often ignore today when we talk about love. Nazareth was 100% correct when they say Love hurts. Love scars. Love wounds and marks. Later in the song they have a couple of lines that go like this: Some fools think / Of happiness, blissfulness, togetherness / Some fools fool themselves / I guess they're not foolin' me. We're fools for love in more than just one way.

We just started a sermon series last week on our heart statement, the guiding statements, the guiding beliefs of our church family. And it all starts with the first heart statement: God is our greatest treasure. Nothing compares with him. He's is great. He is desirable. Paul says in Philippians 3 (vs. 8), "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." This verse from Paul convinces me that Paul would give two thumbs up to our first heart statement: God is our greatest treasure. He says it himself. Knowing God is of greater worth than everything else put together. He's so desirable, Jesus is such a valuable treasure that Paul would lose everything to gain Christ. Later in this chapter Paul admits that he hasn't reached the kind of life he wants to live, but he says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." He's a prize! Oh yes, Paul would be an enthusiastic member of FBC as we affirm with him that God is our greatest treasure.

But, would you believe, that we can't see that, perceive that or notice that on our own. As glorious as God is, we miss it. Let me tell you what I mean and it's some of the most important biblical information you'll ever hear. Friends, our sinfulness is so great, our rebellion is so ugly, we are committed to loving ourselves so much that we don't see God as the great treasure that he is. Turn with me to Eph 2 (READ vs. 1-3).

That image of humanity should startle us. That is what you and I (along with every other human being) are like. We walk a life of sin. It's a life actually following the devilish path of Satan. Satan works so we are passionate about satisfying our own desires and the end of this

life is the wrath of God. And Paul summarizes this kind of life as “being dead in [our] trespasses and sins.”

The image of being dead in our sins is very important. Think about the kind of response dead people have to the beauty of sunrises, the kind of alarm a dead person has to warnings. Consider how dead people are moved by the emotions in music or movies. I hope you’re scratching your head a little; I hope you’re thinking, “Dead people don’t do any of those kinds of things!” Dead people admire a sunrise; their pulse doesn’t quicken when they hear sirens; they don’t cry when they watch a sappy movie. They’re just... dead!

Right. They are just dead. And when we are dead in our trespasses and sins, we can’t see the beauty of God’s glory. We can’t fear the holiness of God. We can’t reach out to God, we can’t hope in God, we can’t do anything for God. We are dead in our sins. And if God has given you eyes and ears to see and hear that reality, I’m hoping it humbles any pride in you that wants to congratulate yourself on treasuring God.

But (let’s change directions), let me tell you, friends, how great it is for me to say and for you to hear that the God of the universe, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, makes dead people live. Look what Paul says next in Eph. 2:4-5 (READ). Let’s just walk through this passage; let me show you how it works.

- Look at that first word, *But*. We just heard a bunch of bad news in vs. 1-3, right? That word of contrast Paul uses to start vs. 4 signals to you and me that he’s about to tell us some good news.
- Look at the phrase in the middle of vs. 5 that reads “he made us alive together with Christ.” That’s what God did for us. He made us alive. If you’ve been born again, if you’ve been saved of your sins, if you are a person who loves God and follows him, it’s because God has made you alive in Christ. He did that. You didn’t do that, right? Dead people can’t do anything. That’s the work of God’s grace.
- Notice also two phrases that are meant to go together. At the beginning of vs. 4 it says that God, *being rich in mercy*, made us alive together in Christ. The other phrase that goes with this theme starts vs. 5, which reads, *even when we were dead in our trespasses*. What’s this highlighting? It’s highlighting how there is absolutely nothing in us that somehow earned or merited God’s gift of the new birth. Nothing. It doesn’t say, “Because we did a few good works” or “because we tried hard” or “because we weren’t as bad as our neighbor, God made us alive together with Christ”. No, because he’s rich in mercy, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins.
- But what does Paul say is God’s chief motivation in making us alive? That’s also in vs. 4; *because of the great love with which he loved us*. That’s why God did what he did; his great love.

That’s what’s needed; the love of God. And it is great love. 1 John 3:1 says, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” This is why we treasure him.

I need to make a turn here in our sermon, but before we do can we can we just stop and reflect on the great love of God? Friends, can you see the miracle of your salvation? That I'm even saved at all blows my mind. God's love is simply so amazing. Don't move past this too quickly, my brothers or sisters. Or if you still need to take a step of faith, may God's great love for you draw you to himself.

God's love for us does something, though, in us. Certainly, it makes us glad. But it changes us in such a way where we can't help but turn around and love other people the same way (REPEAT). 1 John is a very important book of the Bible to read about love. Why don't we turn to chapter 4 and read some select verses (READ 1 John 4:7-12,19-21)

Let me just highlight some important points from this passage.

- First, just like we've learned already, the basis or the foundation of love is God's love for us while we were still sinners. We see that in vs. 9-10. Love is made manifest (known), it says in vs. 9, by God sending Jesus to us so that we might live. Vs. 10 says Jesus dying for our sins (propitiation) is the definition of love. We've covered that already so let's not spend more time.
- Secondly, notice the connection between God's love and our love for others. In vs. 19 John summarizes or explains where our love comes from. He plainly says (vs. 19) "We love because he first loved us." See the connection, friends. That's where your love comes from. So, if you lack love, what you should do? Get more familiar, remind yourself again, of God's love for you and you will love more (look for the practical ways this helps us).
- But, John doesn't just say this is where love comes from, he says if we don't have love for others that calls into question whether we know and experience God's love. John says rather bluntly in vs. 20, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." Whoa! That's pretty startling. So, he's not just saying, "Love comes from God and isn't it nice when we have that love for others." No! He's saying, "If you don't have that love for others that means you don't know God's love."
- So finally, we shouldn't be surprised to hear John command love like he does in vs. 7 and vs. 11. In vs. 7 he says, "Beloved, let us love one another." In vs. 11 he says, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also *ought* to love one another." This is a command; you ought to do it.

Our second heart statement reads this way: *Loving people is our greatest expression of our love for God.* I'm hoping you can see that this statement is just a summary of the teaching we've looked at in the scriptures. Our love for God shouldn't be measured or evaluated by our warm, fuzzy feelings for God on a Sunday morning when we sing our favorite songs. Our love for God is seen and known when we love our brothers and sisters, love our neighbors. And yes, that neighbor kid could who keeps driving his bike through my lawn even though I've told him not to. That co worker who talks too much. My brother or sister in the Lord who has different political views than me... and shares them a lot! That's how I love God; by loving other people.

I like to say it this way: I only love God insofar as I love other people. If I hate other people, criticizing them, purposefully ignoring them in contempt, harboring bitter feelings about them, that's how much I love God.

This is how our second heart statement reads in full:

- Since loving people is our greatest expression of our love for God.
 - We will work and desire the good of others above ourselves
 - This means we will at a minimum obey the "Golden Rule" and will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, work so others can find happiness in Christ Jesus.

Allow me again to highlight a couple of key words and phrases of this heart statement. First, loving others is work. We will *work* for the good of others. We will *work* so others find happiness in Christ Jesus. If you haven't worked, sacrificed, suffered loss for the good of others you haven't truly loved them. Have you ever seen a video on Funniest Home Videos or maybe on YouTube where a dad is trying his best to change his baby's diaper, but his gag reflex is kicking in because it's just a little too stinky or gross for him? Maybe you've experienced that for yourself. Man, when I see that, I'm filled with laughter and sympathy. I've been there (not the gagging part). So they are like fighting their way through, trying not to hurl and change the baby's diaper at the same time. That's love, friends! Love is working for someone's good.

That's where our love for God is displayed, FBC. Your sacrifices, your work, your patient endurance in doing things you quite frankly wouldn't like to make are you displays of love. It's like those pictures we saw early in our service. Love is painful, love is dirty. Love goes to hell and back. Just like Jesus.

Paul Miller in his excellent book called *A Loving Life* says love doesn't have an exit strategy. I love that. Love sticks with the plan no matter how hard it gets. There's no giving up when times get tough in love. Friends, remember that as we do life together. Love God by loving each other when times get tough. It's going to take work. But it's worth it just like the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on that cross was worth it.

Another phrase I want to draw your attention to is that love is working *so others can find happiness in Christ Jesus*. We don't love people if we lead them away from Jesus, only towards Jesus. Our world today believes that we love people if we approve and support them doing whatever they want to do, even if that is choosing a path that is away from Jesus. That's not love.

Has your kid ever told you, "I hate you?" Or how about this: have you ever said (or at least thought) that to your parents? I think if we are honest (and if we can remember) that's probably true of all of us. When godly, Jesus-loving parents are doing their job they stand in the middle of the freeway their kids are tempted to take that leads away from Jesus, am I right? And good parents are saying, "Stop! I'm not letting you go this way if I can help it!" when a kids

wants to go that way. And when we are obstacles to our kids, a hatred rises up. How do we love people? We love them by working for their good in Christ Jesus; we want them to be happy in Christ. We don't love people by affirming and supporting a life that takes them away from Jesus. But you need to know, my good friends, when you love like this others, the world, won't consider your actions as loving. They will call you names like bigot, judgmental, hypocrite. And you know what, we don't always get it right, do we? We can be judgmental; we are hypocritical sometimes. Sometimes are opposition towards relationships the culture accepts isn't birthed in love, but maybe more from fear or ignorance, which can make us bigoted. So we need to be honest about that, confess that sin, so we can love others with a pure love. But don't get suckered into believing that loving other people simply means we cheer them on as they drive down the highway to hell.

Can I give you some homework to do? Just some reflection. We've talked about this before, but it's always worth reminding ourselves: loving others requires you to die to yourself. You can't love others and live for yourself. You will either be committed to your good and happiness or you will work for the good and happiness of other people. There's only one way those two things go together: when you see and believe your good and happiness is Christ Jesus is secure in him as you live for the good and happiness of others. God tests us in this every single day. God gives us all these opportunities in our homes, in our church family, in our neighbors to love others. So, friends, examine the sacrifice required to do this and then make the sacrifices; it's worth it.

And if you're like me and you're thinking, "I'm not the loving man, the loving woman I want to be and that God calls me to be." The problem isn't so much in your effort. It's not a willpower thing. See, study and savor God's love for you and Christ and when you do, by God's Holy Spirit he will make you the loving person he commands.

Key vs. 1 John 3:1

Questions for the week

- What verse today made the biggest impact on you? Why?
- When you reflect on the miracle of God's love for you, what responses come most quickly to your thoughts and mind?
- What sacrifices is God calling you to make to love others?