

March 6th 2011: Love—The Major Non-Negotiable: 1 Peter 4:7-11

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at several acts that are non-negotiable as far as the Christian is concerned. We considered Trust, Worship, Servanthood and Obedience. Today it's love. That very special type of love that we see in its perfection in the ongoing love of God for us.

There can be no doubt that the expression of such love is a non-negotiable, for it is the substance of the major commandment that Jesus gave us as His followers. In Matthew 22:37-38 we have Jesus saying:-

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The love mentioned is what we call agape love after the Greek word used to describe it, for this love is a unique and distinctive love. There are other types of love....sexual love....family love....friendship or mateship love—all so easily corrupted or misused in our world. But this agape love has its source and measure in God. When we desire to see what it is like and how we can express it, we simply look at its manifestation in God the Son—in Jesus.

Indeed, in John 15:12 Jesus, talking to those who wish to follow Him as His disciples, says:-

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

In this chapter of Scripture that is all about the need for those who follow Jesus to abide in Him, it would seem that the essence of doing so is found in loving others in the way that we ourselves have been loved by Jesus.

Again we read in John 13:34-35

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Not only is the fact that love for each other is a non-negotiable for the Christian is confirmed here by the word 'command', but we also see that our agape love for others is the sign or proof to non-believers that we are followers of Jesus.

There can be no act we do as Christians which is more important than this and consequently we need to have a good understanding of what constitutes this type of loving.

Ian Pitt-Watson(750 Engaging Illustrations, Baker 2002 p423 writes:-

There is a natural, logical kind of loving that loves lovely things and lovely people. That's logical. But there is another kind of loving that doesn't look for value in what it loves, but that 'creates' value in what it loves. Like Rosemary's rag doll.

When Rosemary, my youngest child, was three, she was given a little rag doll, which quickly became an inseparable companion. She had other toys that were intrinsically far more valuable, but none that she loved like she loved the rag doll.

Soon the rag doll became more and more rag and less and less doll. It also became more and more dirty. If you tried to clean the rag doll, it became more ragged still. And if you didn't try to clean the rag doll, it became dirtier still.

The sensible thing was to trash the rag doll. But that was unthinkable for anyone who loved my child. If you loved Rosemary, you loved the rag doll—it was part of the package.

"If anyone says, 'I love God' yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar"(1 John 4:20).

"Love me, love my rag dolls," says God, "including the one you see when you look in the mirror. This is the finest and greatest commandment."

When I first read that I was hit by the thought that agape love does not look for value in what it loves. It doesn't look for the one who is easy to love or who we find pleasure in loving. Instead it creates value in what it loves. It looks at the unlovely and the undeserving and makes the decision to value and to love them, even if their un-lovliness to us continues.

And that's exactly how God loves us. 1 John 4:7 begins by saying:-

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.

And then in v10-12 he goes on to describe what this type of love looks like—it's the same as shown on the cross:-

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

When you go out for morning tea today have a look at the metal urn. On its side you will see a thin glass tube. You can tell how much water is in the body of the urn by checking how much water is displayed in the glass tube. What the Bible says in all these passages is that our deep love for God—which is within and cannot be seen—is revealed in our agape love for others.

That's exactly the point that Peter is making in his first letter. He mentions in 1:8 that they love Jesus whom they have not seen, and then five times in the remainder of the letter he encourages them to express their love for Jesus by loving one another as brothers and sisters, and this includes all those God brings them into contact with.

In our reading this morning from 4:7-11 he encourages them to love each other deeply, and the word means fervently or persistently. It contains the idea of continuing to love even when it gets hard; the person is unresponsive or even antagonistic; and others rebuke you for continuing to do so. The reason Peter gives for doing this is because love covers a multitude of sins or weaknesses. You will make many mistakes in your ministry to others, says Peter. You will often be inadequate in what you do. But if you persist in showing agape love, such will be overcome.

Peter then goes on to give some practical ideas of how this agape love can be expressed in a fellowship. He mentions hospitality, using God's gifts etc. But it's Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 who reveals the characteristics of agape love. Now we mainly recognize this passage from weddings, which is interesting because weddings are about two people who find each other attractive and loveable. Paul wrote to a fellowship which was full of infighting and people who were not getting on with each other, telling them that they had to show agape love to each other, especially their enemies, and then lists the characteristics of such love. 1 Cor 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil

but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Now that's a standard of love that married couples have immense trouble with, and they like each other! Imagine what trouble you and I will have in reaching this standard of love to those within the fellowship, or who God draws into it, that we don't like, or get on with.

The problem is that such a standard of love is not natural for sin marred human beings like you and I. In our own strength we can never attain to it. But when we are motivated by the love of Christ for us, and when we seek His strength, then it becomes possible and life changing.

Lucian, an unbelieving Greek philosopher writing in the second century about Christians said:-(Illustrations for Biblical Preaching p225)

"It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator (Jesus) has put it into their heads that they are brethren."

The point is however, that because the expression of such love is hard, we have to want to love others like that and be prepared to see it as our first priority as a fellowship.

In the 2nd chapter of Revelation we discover the Lord's letters from glory to the seven churches in Asia minor. The first letter is to the church in Ephesus and it's a very sad one: Rev 2:1-4

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

From the sound of it this was a strong fellowship that worked really hard. It had a good programme of activities, was theologically correct, and had survived some hard times. But it had forsaken its first love.

Now we normally look at that and presume that this fellowship had lost its first love for Jesus, but that's not necessary what is meant here. For that word first can mean first in priority; and the love can refer to the love we are commanded to have for one another, that is the expression of our love for God.

This church had got so tied up in what it did, that it no longer prioritized love for each other. Doing the work. Guarding against false teachers and Apostles. Surviving when the going got tough were all given more importance in that fellowship than loving each other with agape love.

And what Jesus says is that if you don't change, then you will die as a fellowship

To my mind there is no other passage of Scripture that reveals the importance of a fellowship practicing agape love than this passage. Behind every ministry we do, every relationship we build, every seat we fill, every greeting we give, every prayer we offer, must stand the compulsion of agape love. That's the non-negotiable applies to every fellowship and every believer within it.

Someone, in being asked what such love is said:

It's silence when your words would hurt.
It's patience when your neighbour's curt.
It's deafness when the scandal flows.
It's thoughtfulness for another's woes.
It's promptness when stern duty calls.
It's courage when misfortune falls.

Edwin Markham writing about someone who refused to receive love and met it with hostility and name calling wrote:-

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

As the Lord speaks to each of us this morning. To us who love Him. He calls us to reveal that love by loving others in and attached to our fellowship, as

our first priority. Is there someone right now, whose name He is laying upon your heart who He wants you especially to love with agape love. Maybe, to draw with love a circle that will one day take them in.